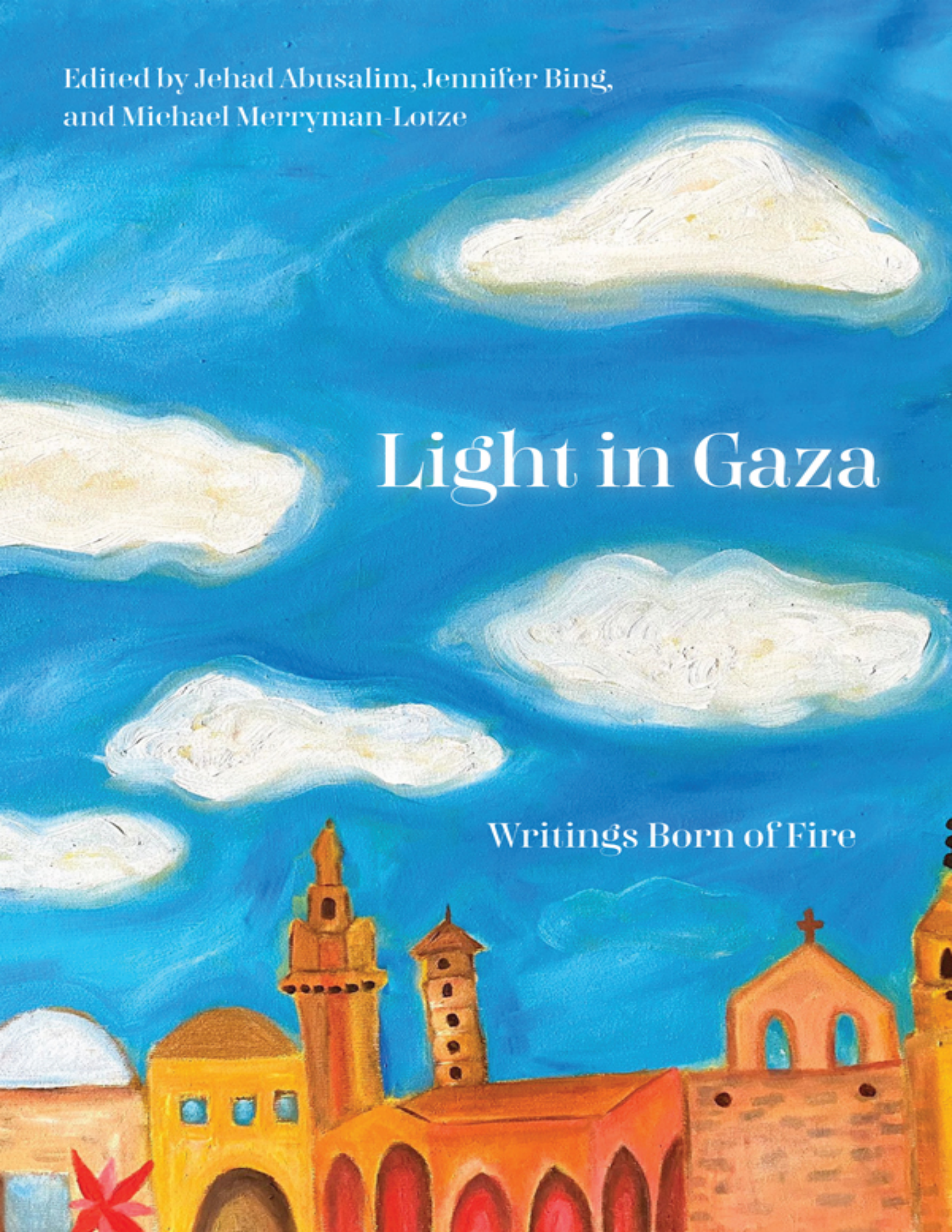
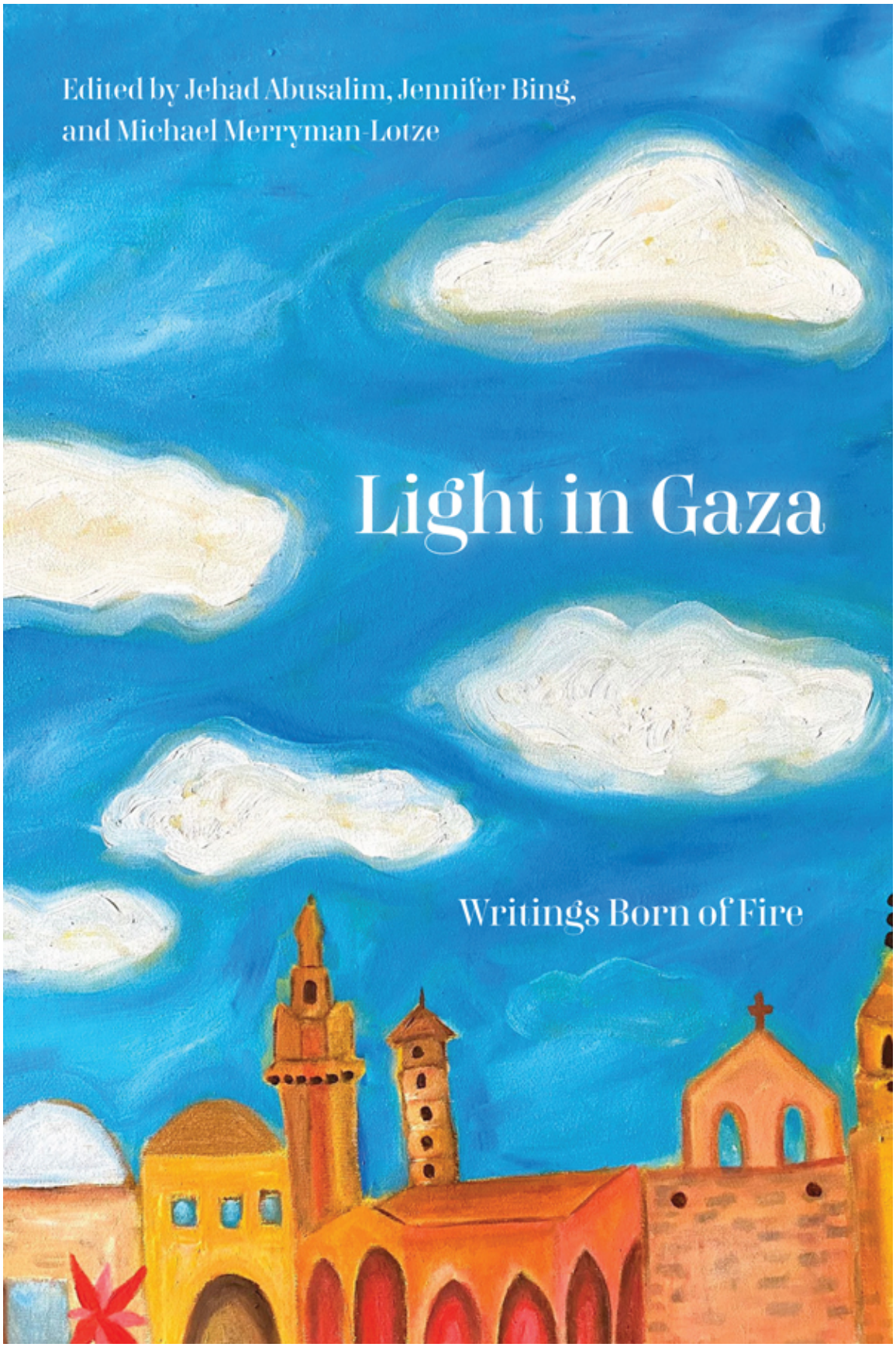
Edited by Jehad Abusalim, Jennifer Bing, and Michael Merryman-Lotze

Light in Gaza

Writings Born of Fire

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Praise for **Light in** Gaza

“Light in Gaza is a strong, honest presentation of today’s Gazans, a necessary read that provides a good understanding of the humanity of the Palestinians in Gaza.” *—PALESTINE CHRONICLE*

“This book is rich in insights from Gazans living under Israel’s brutal siege as well as those living abroad. The editors and authors are determined to start a conversation about Gaza and to break “the intellectual blockade” imposed on it. From Jehad Abusalim’s introduction to the last word, these compelling works move from personal reflections to political and economic analysis. They capture the reader and pull them through a journey that is as uplifting as it is heartbreaking that it should have to be lived at all. It will not leave you unmoved and will reinforce your determination to strive for Palestinian freedom.” —NADIA HIJAB, cofounder and honorary president, Al-Shabaka: the Palestinian Policy Network

“Because of Israel’s blockade, I’ve only been able to go to Gaza once. Everyone I spoke to there could tell me about the unimaginable hardship and trauma they’d experienced. But what stayed with me most was something I hadn’t expected: The unquenchable optimism and humor of Palestinians there. Reading *Light in Gaza* a decade after my visit brought that feeling flooding back. This brilliant, funny, inspiring collection of stories and essays by writers in Gaza was exactly what I needed to reinvigorate my hope and determination to work for a future that uplifts us all.” —ALI ABUNIMAH, author of *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*

“A must-read for anyone interested in learning about Gaza, from the Palestinians of Gaza themselves. Powerful and engaging.” —LAILA ELHADDAD, coeditor of *Gaza Unsilenced*

“Gaza is often referred to as an ‘open-air prison,’ because it is so hard for messages, images or bodies to get out, or for resources to get in. *Light in Gaza* breaks through the prison walls and gives us a unique opportunity to hear and learn from those living under Israeli occupation in Gaza. Their voices are filled with pain, loss, frustration, anger, but most of all, hope. This powerful and beautifully crafted collection is one that readers must engage with heads and hearts wide open.” —BARBARA RANSBY, historian, author, activist

“An emotionally and intellectually sophisticated collection that is deep, processed and enlightening.” —SARAH SCHULMAN, author of *Let the Record Show*

“A book that embodies the central paradox all Gaza-watchers are aware of: while Israel—aided by Egypt and tolerated by the international system—constantly sharpens tools to control and brutalize Gaza, Gaza insists on its agency, its dignity and its imagination. Read these writings—literally ‘born of fire’—for the wealth and variety of their ideas and for their grounding of the aspirations and dreams of Palestinian Gazans.” —AHDAF SOUEIF, author of *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*

“Light In Gaza is essential reading, not least because it reflects the voice of a people who are routinely and egregiously robbed of their basic humanity. It also represents a profound challenge to anyone who reads it. One author asks, ‘Can a story or a poem change the mind? Can a book make a difference?’ The answer, as ever, is up to us all.” —RABBI BRANT ROSEN, founding rabbi of congregation Tzedek Chicago

“As Mahmud Darwish wrote as early as 1973, ‘we do injustice to Gaza when we turn it into a myth.’ This is why *Light in Gaza*, through its insightful collection of essays and poems, offers such a unique picture of the Palestinian experience in a territory cut off from the world for a decade and a half.” —JEAN-PIERRE FILIU, author of *Gaza: A History*

“The poignant first-person essays in this wide-ranging anthology have the greatest and rarest of virtues: they are portraits—brave, tender, resilient—of life in Gaza by the people who actually live it.” —NATHAN THRALL, author of *The Only Language They Understand*

Light in Gaza

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Editors:
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Jennifer Bing
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Haymarket Books
Chicago, Illinois

© 2022 American Friends Service Committee

Published in 2022 by
Haymarket Books
P.O. Box 180165
Chicago, IL 60618
773-583-7884
www.haymarketbooks.org
info@haymarketbooks.org

ISBN: 978-1-64259-725-7

Distributed to the trade in the US through Consortium Book Sales and Distribution (www.cbsd.com) and internationally through Ingram Publisher Services International (www.ingramcontent.com).

This book was published with the generous support of Lannan Foundation and Wallace Action Fund.

Special discounts are available for bulk purchases by organizations and institutions. Please email info@haymarketbooks.org for more information.

Cover artwork by Malak Mattar. Cover design by Rachel Cohen.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Contents

MAP: GAZA STRIP AND GAZA DISTRICT BEFORE1948

FOREWORD

Introduction
Jehad Abusalim

Gaza Asks: When Shall This Pass?
Refaat Alareer

On Why We Still Hold Onto Our Phones and Keep Recording
Asmaa Abu Mezied

Breaking the Vicious Cycle of Permanent Temporality
Shahd Abusalama

Don’t Step on My Feet Again
Basman Aldirawi

Lost Identity: The Tale of Peasantry and Nature
Asmaa Abu Mezied

Why Are You Still Here?
Basman Aldirawi

Ethical Implications of Experimental Design on Affected Communities in the Gaza Strip
Salem Al Qudwa

People’s Light in Gaza’s Darkness
Suhail Taha

Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Restoring Palestinian Rights and Improving the Quality of Life
Nour Naim, translated by Anas Abu Samhan

Exporting Oranges and Short Stories:
Cultural Struggle in the Gaza Strip
Mosab Abu Toha

In the Haze of Fifty-One Days
Dorgham Abusalim

Travel Restrictions as a Manifestation of Nakba:
Gaza, the Path Backward Is the Path Forward
Yousef M. Aljamal

Let Me Dream
Israa Mohammed Jamal

Gaza 2050: Three Scenarios
Basman Aldirawi

A Rose Shoulders Up
Mosab Abu Toha

NOTES

INDEX

ABOUT AFSC

CONTRIBUTORS

Courtesy of Linda Quiquivix

Foreword

Palestinians in Gaza are seldom given voice or asked to speak. Gaza is too often portrayed as a site of destruction or impoverishment. Yet it is so much more than that, as this collection of essays makes clear. In the pages that follow, Palestinians in Gaza powerfully narrate their reality so that people will understand their dreams, fears, and aspirations, including what is needed to bring about change.

The authors in this anthology offer their reflections through personal narratives, poetry, and analyses of economic and cultural issues. In so doing, they not only reveal a commitment to a future that will enable Palestinians to transcend the boundaries that limit them, but also speak about what is needed to realize that future.

We hope this collection will open new understandings and create a new discourse about Gaza and its people, by introducing authentic analysis rooted in scholarly and personal understandings. The damaging divisions and movement restrictions imposed on Palestinians by Israel, particularly since the 1993 Oslo Accords, have fragmented the Palestinian community and isolated Gaza. The intensified military closure and blockade of Gaza has only deepened Gaza's misery. For change to occur, Gaza must be understood as an integral part of historic Palestine. There can be no meaningful or sustainable resolution in Palestine and Israel without Gaza. This book, in its own way, will explain why.

The anthology is deeply personal for us. It is a work inspired by our love for our friends, family, colleagues, and partners in and from Gaza. The brutal realities of Israel's occupation and blockade have continued for too

long and must end, and we hope that in some small way this work can contribute to that change.

As editors we have learned from this experience and from the authors, and we hope that you also will be impacted by their remarkable writing.

We are indebted to our editorial committee members (Tareq Baconi, Ann Lesch, Sara Roy, and Steve Tamari) who worked with the authors on their chapters during a pandemic and while Israeli aggression escalated in May 2021. Their expertise and dedication to justice for Palestinians enriched this collection of writings.

—Jehad Abusalim, Jennifer Bing, Michael Merryman-Lotze

Palestinian boys wave a Palestinian flag during a demonstration to mark the anniversary of Nakba, near the separation fence north of the Gaza Strip. May 6, 2011. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Introduction

Jehad Abusalim

The Gaza Strip is a place we hear about often, on occasions that are not necessarily pleasant. An open-air prison, a besieged enclave, a territory with one of the world's highest population densities—the list of phrases and metaphors experts and writers use to describe the Gaza Strip can be endless, given how much has been written on Gaza. Indeed, the common thread in all these descriptions is an attempt by experts to help their audiences relate to Gaza. However, because Gaza's experience is unique, the place, the people who live there, and their story become abstract and challenging to explain to an outsider who has never been to Gaza or lived there enough to absorb aspects of its experience. This creates a barrier of understanding and imagination between Gaza and the outside world. This intangible barrier becomes an extension of the physical barriers surrounding Gaza. As a result, Gaza is unrelatable and distant.

It is imperative, then, for people of conscience to resist attempts to obscure the histories and experiences of oppressed people, including Palestinians. One crucial step in resisting such obscuration is to recognize the erasure of context. Regimes of oppression work tirelessly to render the historical context of oppressed people irrelevant and obscure. Their final goal is to portray oppressed people and their struggles for reclaiming their rights as irrational and, at worst, reduce them to a threat against those who built their privilege at the expense of others. This is precisely Gaza's story and the story of the entirety of the Palestinian experience. For this reason, when it comes to understanding the Palestinian cause in general, and the contemporary reality in Gaza in particular, historical context matters.

The central element in understanding the historical context of the Gaza Strip and its current reality is the 1948 Nakba (the Catastrophe). For Palestinians, the Nakba was the moment when the State of Israel was established by the Zionist movement in 1948, leading to the uprooting of over 750,000 Palestinians from their cities, towns, and villages. As a result of the Nakba, Palestinians suffered a severe and unprecedented "spatial and territorial rupture," which they still experience to this day. The catastrophic outcome of the Nakba for Palestinians manifested itself in numerous ways. First, the Nakba "prevented Palestinians from enjoying territorial independence and sovereignty over the land where they embraced heritage and culture."[1] In this context, the Gaza Strip was born as a new territory in 1948. Prior to 1948, Gaza City was the capital of the Gaza District, which included more than fifty-three cities, towns, and villages, including Gaza, al-Majdal, and Khan Younis. As a result of the Zionist conquest of Palestinian land, the area of the Gaza District shrunk and was reduced to the Strip we are familiar with today. When the Gaza Strip emerged as a new geographic entity following the 1948 Nakba, within its new confines lived around 100,000 inhabitants, who were joined by 200,000 refugees uprooted by Zionist militias (and later the Israeli military) from lands near and around Gaza.[2]

The authors of this book hope to break the intellectual blockade on Gaza. This book is an attempt by Palestinian writers from Gaza, living in and outside Gaza, to start a conversation about Gaza. It is an intellectual venture that challenges the decades of marginalization and dehumanization imposed on Gaza by Israel and its allies. In an ever-connected world, the task of people of conscience around the world must be to challenge the blockades and isolation of entire groups of people who are subject to policies of collective punishment.

I was supposed to write this introduction before May 2021. That month, Israel attacked the Gaza Strip as part of a campaign of large-scale aggression that encompassed almost every corner of historic Palestine. Also that month, the Palestinian people, in Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza

Strip, inside Israel, and in their exile, stood up together in an uprising known as Intifidat al-Wihda, or the Unity Intifada. Palestinians rose against Israeli actions in Jerusalem—which they viewed as an assault on their collective dignity and existence. On the eve of the seventy-third anniversary of the Nakba, Palestinians watched with pain, on live television and on social media, as Zionist settlers backed by the full force of the Israeli state attempted to expel Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah and other communities in and around Jerusalem. They watched in horror at scenes of Israeli police violating the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This brutal Israeli suppression of unarmed mobilization expanded beyond Jerusalem to engulf the Gaza Strip, which was subject to two long weeks of criminal bombardment and destruction.

As the Israeli assault on the Palestinian people raged and escalated, I put this introduction aside, suspended all work on this anthology project, and shifted my focus to advocating for an end to the aggression and raising awareness regarding the events unfolding in Palestine. My colleagues at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the editorial committee of this anthology were less concerned with deadlines and submissions and more concerned with the literal physical safety of the authors, most of whom are based in the Gaza Strip. During the Israeli assault on Gaza, I hosted two of the authors—Asmaa Abu Mezied and Refaat Alareer—on a Facebook Live event to speak about the situation as the bombs were falling. My colleagues and I were in constant touch with AFSC's team in Palestine, especially in Gaza, and with the other authors throughout the long days of the aggression, making sure they were safe and sound. Indeed, one can say that this book was written under and during the most Gazan circumstances. It is as Gaza as it gets.

Writing this introduction after May 2021 did not change much of its content, though. The events of that month instead reinforced my conviction that such a book is timely and needed. The need for a serious, meaningful, and informed conversation about Gaza and the entirety of the Palestine question beyond the existing clichés, stereotypes, slogans, and ridiculous political processes and frameworks was even more clear. While May 2021

and the months that followed showed much progress in growing global solidarity with Palestinians, including notable shifts in US public opinion, the conversation about Palestine in general, and Gaza in particular, still suffered from the same old problems. Overall, conversations about Gaza fall under a security discourse promoted by Israel and its allies, one that reduces the question of Gaza's reality into how it factors in Israel's security, therefore dismissing the political and historical roots of Gaza's ongoing predicament. Moreover, others approach Gaza from a humanitarian lens that sees the population merely as hapless victims. Still others see Palestinians in Gaza as heroes and martyrs on the front line of the Palestinian liberation struggle. What is missing is a meaningful conversation about Gaza, led by Palestinian voices, that reflects on the past, present, and future of Gaza as a place with two million people with dreams, aspirations, and an unresolved plight for justice, return, and the reclamation of their rights.

I started working at AFSC in the spring of 2018. My first day at work coincided with the start of the Great March of Return, a movement of unarmed, mass popular mobilization by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. In the words of Palestinian writer and intellectual Ghassan Kanafani, the march aimed to "knock on the walls of the tanker."[3] It was one of the most prolonged, rigorous protest movements in Palestinian history, lasting for over two years. The central theme of the march was the issue of the right of return—hence the name. From my first day at AFSC, I dedicated my time, focus, and energy to shedding light on the March of Return. I was lucky to find the proper political and intellectual foundation and understanding of Gaza's experience, which made it possible for our team to engage in a focused effort to educate the American public— and beyond—on the events unfolding in the Gaza Strip. What made our engagement on Gaza unique, however, was an unwavering willingness to constantly situate Gaza and any developments that unfold there within the broader context of Palestinian history—especially in the shadow of the Nakba, its continuation, and the need for its end as a way forward for peace and justice in Palestine-Israel and the larger region. AFSC's early attention to the significance of the

Great March of Return, and its constant focus on Gaza, stems from the organization's experience working on the ground, in the Gaza Strip, immediately following the Nakba of 1948. In 1949, AFSC agreed to a request from the United Nations to assist Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. AFSC's engagement early on with the issue of displaced Palestinians, which was followed by decades of direct political and humanitarian work on the ground, has made the organization a leading voice on the need to understand the Palestinian experience in Gaza, especially with regard to the issue of return and the need to engage Gaza's crises through addressing their root historical causes.

The idea behind this book evolved thanks to years of focus on questions related to the Gaza Strip—its past, present, and future—as part of the Palestine issue. In 2015, AFSC launched the Gaza Unlocked campaign to access firsthand accounts from Palestinians living in Gaza and advocate ending the Israeli-imposed blockade, which had intensified starting in 2007. The campaign relied on various tools to educate the US public on Gaza, including holding events, seminars, and the production of visual and written educational materials.

Throughout our work on Palestine and on Gaza, the AFSC team noted an enormous desire on the part of activists, advocates, and people with interest in Palestine to learn about Gaza, talk to people there, and understand the Palestinian experience through Gaza's lens. In 2018, AFSC's Gaza Unlocked campaign published an essay booklet entitled *Life Under Blockade: A Collection of Essays*, in which twelve Gaza-based young authors wrote in English about their experience growing up under Israeli blockade, closure, and military aggressions. In 2019, AFSC hosted Rafah-based author, intellectual, and activist Ahmed Abu Artema, a refugee who dreams of return and whose words helped inspire the Great March of Return. Ahmed travelled across thirteen cities in the United States, talking about Gaza, the right of return, and the need to end the Nakba. In recent years, as part of the Gaza Unlocked campaign, AFSC organized a myriad of panels, events, seminars, and workshops for activists, students, and the general public to advance the conversation about Gaza. In addition, we

coordinated virtual connections between Palestinians in Gaza and Palestinians and advocates in the US. The more spaces we created for such conversations, the more people participated, and the more they expressed passion for connecting with Gaza and fighting to end the blockade and the Nakba. This passion and enthusiasm inspired us to conduct this project.

Throughout our work, the AFSC team also noted several patterns and issues regarding Gaza and how people approach it, whether in the broader public or the context of the Palestine solidarity movement. First, because of the many years the Gaza Strip has been physically isolated, most people think of it in abstract and simplistic terms. Second, unlike other parts of historic Palestine, the Gaza Strip is not accessible for many Palestinians, solidarity activists, visitors, or tourists. The other consequence of Gaza's isolation is that fewer Palestinians living there can travel and meet people outside the Gaza Strip. The result of this isolation is Gaza's remoteness, not only in terms of physical distance but also in terms of how we understand Gaza, the experiences of people there, and the kind of discussions and conversations people have about Gaza. Third, the Gaza Strip has also been politically excluded because of a series of sanctions the international community, Israel, certain Arab regimes, and the Palestinian Authority imposed on Gaza. These sanctions were first imposed following the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections by the actors mentioned above, the same actors who also intervened in Palestine in other ways that fomented civil strife and violence, leading to the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007. That takeover in turn resulted in strengthened sanctions and the collective punishment of two million Palestinians in Gaza with the goal of taming Hamas. Today, almost fifteen years since this process ensued, Hamas is still in power in the Gaza Strip, and the measures of blockade and collective punishment have failed to topple Hamas's rule; instead, they caused deep social, economic, health, and psychological disasters—adding to the endless list of difficulties of life in the besieged Gaza Strip.

When people talk about Gaza, there has also been a tendency, intentional or unintentional, to reduce Gaza to Hamas, and vice versa. The result is an obscured understanding of the Palestinian experience in Gaza, one that

overlooks the rich, diverse, and sophisticated experiences of Palestinians who live there. These false narratives about Gaza that are used to justify its political isolation are desirable outcomes for Israel and its allies. They have created a situation where Gaza has been taken away as an immediate problem and where it can be viewed as a "problem" to be dealt with later. Gaza can be kept out of discussions regarding "peace," and Hamas can be blamed for a lack of Palestinian political unity and, consequently, as the reason there is no partner with whom Israel can dialogue regarding a peace agreement. This justifies a complete lack of engagement with the genuine issues at the core of Gaza's many crises, namely the refugee issue and the refusal to acknowledge that a just resolution, rooted in the law and in the Palestinian people's historic and inalienable rights to live in their homeland, is central to achieving lasting peace in the region.

The problem with the current discourse on Palestine in general, and on Gaza in particular, is that Palestinians are not allowed the space to engage in conversations about their future. The formal political framework maintained by the international community is no less violent than life on the ground in Palestine. This violence manifests when the international community comes up with "solutions" and visions for the present and the future that fit Israel's interests, at the expense of Palestinian rights and well-being, in the short and long term. It is the violence of ignoring honest and brave Palestinian voices that refuse to succumb to the narratives and agendas imposed by Israel and its allies. It is the violence of abandoning Gaza to years of closure, isolation, and blockade, normalizing the collective punishment of two million Palestinians, and then talking about such measures as policy approaches in ways devoid of consideration for the humanity and pain of Palestinians. It is the violence of criminalizing and silencing honest Palestinian voices that refuse to relinquish their rights and submit to the fragmentation that is maintained in scenarios put forward by proponents of the two-state solution.[4]

No issue more clearly exemplifies this exclusion of Palestinian concerns than the Nakba. For Palestinians, the Nakba is not just an event that

occurred in the past; it is a process that continues to shape life in Palestine in general, and in Gaza in particular. The centrality of the Nakba to the Palestinian experience is not just about the commemoration of a tragic event from the past. It is about understanding how injustice and discrimination were produced between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, and how they continue today.

The continuation of the Nakba as a process can be described as a painful but straightforward equation: Israel's existence as a Zionist and Jewish-majority state must be at the expense of Palestinian existence. This is very clear in continuing the plight of the refugees and other Palestinians plight regarding the loss of land and lack of rights. For Israeli Jews to realize their potential, enjoy self-determination, sovereignty, and access to rights, including the right to land, property, and safety, Palestinians were—and to varying degrees still are—deprived of these rights and privileges.

The need for the Nakba to come to an end has been the common thread running through the entirety of the Palestinian struggle for liberation since 1948, up through the March of Return of 2018 and the Unity Intifada of 2021. Both moments of mass popular mobilization and resistance reiterated what Palestinians have considered their core demand—*to go home*. For decades, Israel, the United States, and parts of the international community have dismissed the centrality of this demand, treated it with cynicism, and focused on promoting solutions that do not take seriously the question of Palestinian refugees, as well as the continuation of the Nakba as a process that encompasses every aspect of life in historic Palestine and beyond.

The only solution accepted by global power brokers is the "two state" option, which the international community has declared the only path to peace. But if there is one thing more impossible to achieve at this point than the two-state solution, it perhaps would be counting the many articles by experts and pundits that describe the two-state solution as dead or impossible to achieve. Yet, despite decades of warnings, calls for the two-state delusion persist.

In discussions regarding the death or failure of that solution, the focus, rightly, tends to be on how settlement building and expansion is the major obstacle, if not the nail in the coffin of the two-state solution. Yet, those epiphanies—and late realizations—could have been realized way earlier if those "experts" had paid attention to other aspects of the Palestinian experience under Israeli settler-colonialism.

Palestinians object to the two-state framework on moral, political, historical, and legal grounds. But there are additional practical factors that should make it clear to all why the two-state process as it has been pursued is not acceptable to most Palestinians. The Gaza Strip represents 1 percent of the total area of historic Palestine. Currently, two million Palestinians live there, 70 percent of whom are 1948 refugees and their descendants. Today, the Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated places on earth —with an average population density of 13,069 per square mile. According to a United Nations Population Fund report entitled *Palestine 2030 – Demographic Change: Opportunities for Development*, Gaza's population "will more than double . . . from 1.9 to 4.8 million in 2050."[5] This means that population density also will more than double, from the current rate of 13,000 people per square mile to approximately 34,000. In a de-developed region such as the Gaza Strip, such a population increase will face critical challenges.

The Gaza Strip as a geographic entity was born out of the Nakba, and from the early moments of its formation it lacked sufficient resources to ensure its inhabitants—natives and refugees—a dignified life. In justifying settlement expansion in the West Bank, Israel cites natural population growth as a key factor. Yet, we rarely hear or read anything about the ramifications of Palestinian natural population growth, whether in Gaza, in the West Bank, in cities and towns inside Israel, or in refugee camps in Arab countries. Proponents of the modern-day partition rarely provide any answers about how their solution will solve the pressing issues and challenges—such as Palestinian population growth—and where and how Palestinians in this new state can build a sustainable, healthy, and thriving

life. This is just one example of how the current discourse lacks any serious reflection or engagement with questions related to the future of Palestinians, whether in broad and abstract terms or in specific, issue-oriented ones, focusing on environmental, economic, and social concerns, and providing a way forward and hope for people.

In September 2020, AFSC issued a call for abstract submissions entitled "Gaza: Reimagining the Boundaries of Possibility." It was an open invitation for Palestinian writers to submit chapters exploring the central question: Can a better future for Gaza be imagined as a part of a broad vision of ending the Nakba through return, restoration of rights, and achieving justice? This anthology project aims to reaffirm Gaza's place in the identity, conscience, and history of the Palestinian people. We sought writings that can help challenge attempts to isolate and separate the Gaza Strip from the rest of Palestine. Another goal is to help shift the current discourse on Gaza and inspire advocates and experts who focus on Palestine to approach Gaza in fresh ways, beyond the existing clichés and outdated discourses. By identifying the roots of Gaza's current problems, this anthology seeks to imagine a future where such problems can be overcome. This requires introducing authentic analysis, rooted in scholarly and personal understanding of Gaza's past, present, and future, as part of the overall Palestinian story. We wanted to challenge how people talk about Palestinian suffering, especially when people detach it from the original roots and the processes that led to its unfolding. The writings in this anthology examine Palestinian agency, power, powerlessness, suffering, and the constant pursuit to overcome the enormous challenges the current reality reproduces.

This book does not claim to provide a manual or a road map for solving Gaza's many crises, nor does it try to offer concrete, practical solutions for issues such as water and electricity shortages or freedom of movement. This book is an exercise of deeper reflection by Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere about the Palestinian experience in Gaza. It is an attempt to put into words certain aspects of the Palestinian experience in and around Gaza that have been ignored, underrepresented, and dismissed. The editors and

authors of this book acknowledge that it is challenging to represent all voices of a diverse population such as the Palestinians in Gaza. Yet, in the call for submissions, we sought to include a diverse set of voices and experiences, including from writers who have not yet appeared in English-language publications. The book does not offer a comprehensive picture of the Palestinian experience, whether in Gaza or elsewhere, nor does it seek to capture realities experienced by Palestinians in other parts of historic Palestine or exile. Instead, this book combines several essays written by Palestinians inside and outside the Gaza Strip, in which they talk about Gaza from the perspective of their personal and first-hand accounts, as experts, and as participants in the Palestinian saga.

This book is an attempt to break the intellectual blockade and the political exclusion of Palestinian voices. Its goal goes beyond demanding "permission to narrate." While it seeks to provide a platform for Palestinian authors to write about Gaza, the book also seeks to inspire action and offer a glimpse of hope in a time of despair and political deadlock. It also aims to provide an exercise in imagination—an act and a practice that Palestinians, especially in Gaza, rarely undertake. After all, people are caught up with the difficulties of their daily lives under Israeli occupation and oppression. It is the duty of allies of the Palestinian people, who believe in the morality and justice of Palestinian liberation, especially in solidarity movements in the West, to actively create such spaces. While the blockade on Gaza is a physical one, ideas and visions for liberation cannot be limited by Israel's fences and barriers. The dismissal and exclusion of Palestinian voices from debates and conversations about the past, present, and future are as destructive as the physical blockade itself.

Light in Gaza: Writings Born of Fire includes essays and poems written by Palestinians inside and outside the Gaza Strip. The words of the authors take the reader on a journey of reflection, learning, and understanding of the Palestinian experience in Gaza. The chapters are thematically diverse, with each author, in their chapter, covering one or more aspect of life there. Together, they form the common thread that constitutes the book's central question: How do we understand Gaza in the shadow of the Nakba and its

continuation, and how can we imagine a better future? This theme is powerfully described in Refaat Alareer's "Gaza Asks: When Shall This Pass?" In this opening chapter, Alareer, a Gaza-based educator and professor of English literature, captures how he, as an individual and as a son, husband, sibling, and member of a community, has experienced violence in Gaza throughout multiple stages of his life. Asmaa Abu Mezied contributes two pieces of writing. The first, "On Why We Still Hold Onto Our Phones and Keep Recording," is a powerful essay in response to the Israeli assault on Gaza in May 2021, and the second, "Lost Identity: The Tale of Peasantry and Nature," is a timely reflection that builds understanding of the value of land in Palestinian life and why returning to the land is not only about the act of reclaiming property, but also about reclaiming dignity, harmony with nature, and the connections between human beings and the soil that transcend limited modern understandings of what such relationships look like.

In her chapter, "Breaking the Vicious Cycle of Permanent Temporality," Shahd Abusalama writes about power, agency, and the persistence of resistance in the face of immense challenges. She asks questions that haunt Palestinians everywhere: "How can we break free from this vicious circle that traps us and our families in a state of permanent temporality?" "How can we protect future generations from undergoing the same experiences?" Gaza-based poet Basman Aldirawi contributes two powerful poems, "Don't Step on My Feet Again," and "Why Are You Still Here?," as well as an analysis and reflection on Gaza's possible political future in "Gaza 2050: Three Scenarios." In "Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Restoring Palestinian Rights and Improving the Quality of Life," Nour Naim takes the reader to the virtual world, exploring opportunities and challenges related to artificial intelligence and incorporating that world into conversations about Palestinian liberation.

Salem Al Qudwa writes about what is constructed on Palestinian lands in his chapter, "Ethical Implications of Experimental Design on Affected Communities in the Gaza Strip." Al Qudwa talks about issues related to urban life, housing, and shelter construction in a place that is densely

populated and subject to regular large-scale destruction. Al Qudwa's chapter is timely, especially since the issue of reconstruction is more important than ever. Gaza-based poet Mosab Abu Toha takes the reader on a journey into Gaza's cultural scene, and what he and his peers, from Gaza's cultural, artistic, and intellectual communities, grapple with as they try to keep the Gaza Strip culturally thriving in the face of immense challenges. Dorgham Abusalim writes about his unusual trip back to Gaza in 2014 after spending several years away for school. His detailed personal account of his visit, during which he witnessed most of the fifty-one-day Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, is a personal witness to the difficulty of everyday life in Gaza, and how someone faced with Gaza's extraordinary reality can survive multilayered challenges—political, social, and interpersonal.

Also on the issue of travel restrictions, Yousef Aljamal writes a personal account about the physical barriers that prevent freedom of movement and family reunion in "Travel Restrictions as a Manifestation of Nakba: Gaza, the Path Backward Is the Path Forward." Israa Mohammed Jamal writes in her chapter, "Let Me Dream," about something most people take for granted: the ability to travel freely, especially within historic Palestine. It is a witness to what confined Palestinians wish to see beyond the walls and fences that Israel builds and maintains. From beyond Israel's fences and walls, Ramallah-based Suhail Taha writes about Gaza, a part of his homeland that he and millions are not allowed to visit. Taha delves deeply into how fellow Palestinians in Gaza experience one of the most notorious aspects of the blockade—electricity blackouts.

The book ends with Mosab Abu Toha's poem "A Rose Shoulders Up," which is more veracious than any conclusion we could write. May this book inspire us all to find and nurture the roses and light among those who struggle for survival and freedom in Gaza, in all of Palestine, and in every corner of the world where injustice still haunts the wretched of this earth.

A general view of the rubble of buildings destroyed by Israeli bombs in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood, east of Gaza City on July 26, 2014. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Gaza Asks: When Shall This Pass?

Refaat Alareer

In 1985, when I was a first grader, I was awakened by a hustle and bustle of noise downstairs. It was pitch-dark. I could hear my mom sobbing. There were women comforting her. I had never heard Mom weep before. It still haunts me to this day.

When I snuck downstairs to see what was going on, I found that my dad's old mahogany Peugeot 404 had its front and rear windshields shattered, the passenger door was wide open, and blood was all over the place. (Does this explain my fear of riding "shotgun" when we drive our car?)

My father had been coming back home that night from work and it was his business partner's turn to drive. As they passed the Nahal Oz military crossing from Israel into the Gaza Strip, out of nowhere, a hail of bullets struck their car. It was in the midst of that chatter that I first heard the words "the army," "Israel," "the Jews," and "shooting." I almost never bought a toy gun as a kid.

Did the sleepy soldier's finger slip and pull the trigger? We did not know. Did he shoot the car for fun? We did not know. There was no investigation. And no one was held accountable.

My father was injured in the attack and had to deal with the shrapnel of the bullet that ricocheted and hit his shoulder. For decades, especially in cold weather, he suffered from some sort of phantom pain. The whole family had to live with the trauma that our father and breadwinner was almost killed in an instant, a trauma in whose shadow we still live. I still go to check on my family members every time I hear bullets outside. Every

time I am made to recall those memories, I remember the women's comforting words in my home: "It shall pass."

Scorched childhood. Traumatic memories. Pain. Loss. And there is more.

Cheshire-ish Smiles

Four years later, I was minding my own business (only being a nuisance to one of my classmates) in the schoolyard, when a sizable rock whizzed and hit me in the head. I recall that I blacked out for some time. Bleeding profusely, I pressed my left hand on my head to stop the bleeding. The little kids swarmed around me, all pointing up to the adjacent four-story house whose roof was occupied by Israeli soldiers for a military post.

The Israeli soldier who threw the rock was smiling from ear to ear, a smile reminiscent of the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland.* The doctor who dressed the wound kept comforting me, "It's nothing. It shall pass."

Just two years later, I encountered another soldier who grinned like that from ear to ear. He shot me with a hail of rubber-coated bullets straight in the chest and arm as I hurled stones at the military jeeps invading the Shuja'iyya neighborhood.

"It shall pass," my grandmother told me as she poured cold water on my arm and chest, promising never to tell my father I got shot, but never telling me off for being one of the Intifada's stone throwers.

Early in my life, I learned one main thing about the Israeli occupation: the best course of action, whether or not you throw stones, is to run when you see soldiers, because who they target is largely arbitrary. Even if you go about your life in a peaceful way, minding your own business, if soldiers catch you, they will beat you up, or worse, arrest you. This is why Israel has killed a lot more civilians than freedom fighters.

I have never been caught in my life. I was shot three times with rubber-coated metal bullets and was beaten only when the soldiers stormed our

home. They slapped me, my brothers, and cousins dozens of times because when they checked, our hearts were racing, a sign we were running and possibly throwing stones. We were between eight and eleven years old then. Our hearts always raced.

As I grew into a proud stone thrower at the age of twelve, the thing I feared most was my dad's wrath. He worked in Israel as a laborer and, if he had caught me throwing stones, he would have rebuked me. My dad was not heartless or abusive. He just knew that if the Israeli forces had caught me, he would have lost his work permit. I survived the First Intifada (1987–93), in which Israel killed over 1,600 Palestinians and injured thousands. I was lucky I escaped Israel's bullets and Yitzhak Rabin's "broken bones" policy.

That was not true of my friend Lewa Bakroun, then thirteen, who was chased by an Israeli settler who shot him dead from point-blank range in front of his classmates. The Israeli settler did not want to punish Lewa for throwing stones, for Lewa did not throw stones. The settler wanted to teach those who threw stones a lesson, by killing a kid. In front of the eyes of scores of little scared kids going back home from school. And a few meters away from Lewa's home. His mother's shrieks still ring in my ears.

In the midst of writing this, I called my childhood friend and Lewa's soulmate and cousin, Fady, to check the date of Lewa's murder. Fady was at Shifa Hospital. He informed me that Haniya, Lewa's mother, had a cancerous tumor and couldn't travel for treatment because of the Israeli siege on Gaza.

"It shall pass," I comforted Fady.

"It shall pass," he echoed nonchalantly.

The Second Intifada

In 1997, as an undergraduate, I chose to major in English literature. I had many stories to tell in English to wider audiences. As the Second Intifada raged and as Israel started massacring Palestinians again, I began to learn

more about Palestine and the military occupation. I wanted to do more with my English skills and my experience being born and raised under Israeli occupation. I remember when I first heard the question, “How many more Palestinians should be massacred for the world to care about our lives?” I thought, naïvely, that repeating the question would change people. It would make them think and reconsider their positions. I posted it all over the forums I was part of then. But Israel kept killing us. And Israel kept destroying our lives. And boy was I wrong about the world’s reaction!

In 2001, Israeli occupation forces opened fire on Palestinian farmers in the Shuja’iyya neighborhood in Gaza City, killing a distant cousin, Tayseer Alareer, while he was farming his land. Tayseer was shot by Israeli troops at Nahal Oz, a kibbutz that also hosted a military watchtower. This was the very same military post where my father was shot about twenty-five years earlier.

Tayseer was a farmer. He was not a fighter. He was not a stone thrower. He was as simple as a farmer minding his own business can be. But that did not shield him from Israeli fire. Ironically, Israeli troops would occasionally stop at Tayseer’s farm and ask for chickpeas or an ear of corn. Was the soldier who killed Tayseer one of those who enjoyed the occasional free chickpeas or corn? We did not know. Because Tayseer’s life did not matter, and therefore there was no investigation into the shooting.

Tayseer left behind three little kids, a distraught widow, and a farm without a farmer. At the funeral, people comforted the unknowing kids. Everyone insisted: It shall pass. It shall pass.

As the Second Intifada escalated, Israel slaughtered more and more Palestinians, some of whom were relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Stories of Gaza

After Israel’s Operation Cast Lead (2008–9), which claimed the lives of over 1,400 Palestinians in twenty-three days, life in Gaza was unbearable. Israel tightened its noose around Gaza’s neck. Israel literally counted the

calories entering Gaza. The plan was to keep Palestinians hungry but not starve them to death. Mail, books, timber, chocolate, and most raw materials were all banned. The war made tens of thousands homeless.

I was a young academic with a masters' degree in comparative literature from University College London, teaching world literature and creative writing at the Islamic University in Gaza (IUG). I remember, during the onslaught, spending the twenty-three days telling my little kids, Shymaa, Omar, and Ahmed, many stories to distract them. Some were stories my mother told me as a child or variations on her stories, featuring my children as the heroes and saviors every now and then. Even though bombs and missiles could be heard in the background, my children were transfixed, listening to my stories like never before. I spent most of the time trying to make sure I held these storytelling sessions in the room least likely to take a hit from stray Israeli missiles. As a Palestinian, I have been brought up on stories and storytelling. It's both selfish and treacherous to keep a story to yourself—stories are meant to be told and retold. If I kept a story to myself, I would be betraying my legacy, my mother, my grandmother, and my homeland.

My stories were both an end and a means. As I told stories to my children to distract, soothe, and educate them, I felt very close to my mother and to my grandparents. The stories were my window to my mother's past, to my past, as I started reliving every minute she had spent in a homemade panic room her grandfather had prepared for them before Israel first invaded Gaza decades ago. And I remembered how my heart would skip a beat each time she told us of the many near-death experiences she and her family had to endure. The mere idea of my mother coming very close to death, just for being, still transfixes me.

One day, Mom told us she had been on her way to school when a shell exploded a few meters away from her. She kept walking and attended her classes. The following day she woke up and went to school like nothing had happened the day before, like she was rejecting the rule of the shells. (In retrospect, I believe that's why I almost never skipped a class in my life.)

But my mother has outlived Israel's brutal invasion, and so have her stories. During the 2008–9 attacks on Gaza, the more bombs Israel detonated, the more stories I told. When bombs interrupted the stories, I calmed my little ones down: "It shall pass," I lied.

Telling stories was my way of resisting. It was all I could do. And it was then that I decided that if I lived, I would dedicate much of my life to telling the stories of Palestine, empowering Palestinian narratives, and nurturing younger voices.

Gaza went back to normal, as we dusted ourselves off from the most immediate pain and agony that came with the Israeli attacks of "Cast Lead." Only this time there were new piles of bodies, houses, orphans, ruins, and stories to tell. I went back to my classrooms and to my students at the English Department of IUG, whose newest, highly equipped laboratory building had been bombed by Israel. Scars were everywhere. Every single person in Gaza had to mourn a loved one. I started inviting my friends and students to write about what they had to endure and to bear witness to the anguish Israel had caused.

"Writing is a testimony, a memory that outlives any human experience, and an obligation to communicate with ourselves and the world. We lived for a reason, to tell the tales of loss, of survival, and of hope," I told my students. And this is how *Gaza Writes Back* was born. I started assigning my students and training them to write short stories based on the realities they and their families and friends experienced. *Gaza Writes Back* is a book of short stories written in English by young Palestinians from Gaza, published in the United States in 2014. It includes twenty-three stories to correspond to the twenty-three days of Israeli terror in 2008 and 2009. The book is now available in seven languages. During our tour in the US and around the world, where we spoke at many events about the book, the solidarity, support, and activism felt tangible. We felt so good when people listened and sympathized and expressed their support.

And I believed that *Gaza Writes Back* would make a difference. It might help shift public opinion. It might help alleviate the pain and suffering that

Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem and everywhere experienced as part of their lives. But can a story or a poem change the mind or the heart of the occupiers? Can a book make a difference? Will this calamity, this occupation, this apartheid pass? It seems it won't. A few months later, in July 2014, Israel waged its most barbaric campaign of terror and destruction in decades, killing over 2,400 Palestinians and destroying over twenty thousand homes in fifty-one days.

2014 War

During the 2014 war, Israel bombed the administration building of IUG. The missiles destroyed the English Department offices, including my office where I stocked so many stories, assignments, and exam papers for potential book projects.

When I started teaching at IUG, I met young students, most of whom have never been outside Gaza and have suffered greatly under Israeli occupation. This suffering became even worse when Israel tightened its siege in 2006. Many of them could not go to the West Bank for family visits, or to Jerusalem for a simple religious ritual, or to the United States or the United Kingdom for research and visits. Books, along with thousands of other commodities, were not normally allowed into Gaza. The consequences of putting this young generation in the dark, the world must know, has far worse ramifications than we would ever expect.

At the beginning, my students must have found it difficult to study Yehuda Amichai (because he is an Israeli Jew!) or to accept my "progressive" views about Shakespeare's Shylock or Dickens's Fagin. For many, Fagin was the source of evil; the embodiment of the devil that destroys society by murdering, at least metaphorically, its future, and the little ones, by turning them into thieves and murderers.

Only later were my students able to see that Fagin was a mere product of a society that hates those who are different, those with a darker skin or a different race or having different stories. They came to realize Fagin was

even better than the church itself. They saw him offering a shelter for the homeless and making the likes of Oliver feel happy and hopeful for a little bit. Fagin, the Jew, was no longer a Jew. He was a human being, just like any one of us. Fagin's refusal to wake Oliver up to send him to break into some house—commenting, "Not now. Tomorrow. Tomorrow"—was no longer seen as ironic, but as evidence of a man with a heart. The most challenging question I asked was, "What would you do if you were Fagin?"—a question that invited my students to reconsider issues of race and religion, and transcend them to embrace much higher concepts of humanity and shared interests.

But teaching Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was trickier. To many of my students Shylock was beyond repair. Even Shylock's daughter hated him! However, with the open-mindedness, commitment to dialogue, and respect for all cultures and religions that IUG promotes, I worked very closely with my students to overcome all prejudices when judging people, or at least when analyzing literary texts.

Shylock, therefore, also evolved from a simplistic idea of a Jew who wanted a pound of flesh just to satisfy some cannibalistic primitive desires of revenge into a totally different *human being.* Shylock was just like us Palestinians, exposed constantly not only to Israeli aggression and destruction and racism, but to Israel's war machine of misinformation and defamation. Shylock had to endure many religious and spiritual walls erected by an apartheid-like society. Shylock was in a position where he had to choose between total submission and humiliation, relegated to living as a subhuman, and resisting oppression by the means available to him. He chose to resist, just like Palestinians do nowadays.

Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech was no longer a pathetic attempt to justify murder, but rather an internalization of long years of pain and injustices. I was not at all surprised when one of my students found the similarities between us and Shylock so striking that she altered the speech to:

> Hath not a Palestinian eyes? Hath not a Palestinian hands, organs,
> dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with
> the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
> to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means,
> warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer
> as a Christian or a Jew is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
> If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us,
> do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

Perhaps the most emotional moment in my six-year teaching career in IUG's English Department was when I asked my students which character they identified with more: Othello, with his Arab origins, or Shylock the Jew. Most students felt they were closer to Shylock and more sympathetic to him than to Othello. Only then did I realize that I had managed to help my students grow and shatter the prejudices they had grown up with because of the occupation and the siege. Sadly, the exam papers which I stored in my office were set ablaze in a way that echoes how Shylock was stripped of his money and possessions. I always wanted to make use of the answers and compile them into a book.

A Merry Sport

Soon after Israel destroyed the administration building, an Israeli army spokesman declared on Twitter that they destroyed a "weapons development center" at the Islamic University. However, a few hours later, Israel's defense minister issued a press release giving a different reason why Israel bombed IUG: "IUG was developing chemicals, to be used against us." Of course, there was no shred of evidence for this claim. We just have to take it for granted that Israel never ever lies. We are even supposed to ignore the glaring inconsistency in how the pretext was upgraded from a mere center to develop weapons to one that develops "chemicals."

My talks about tolerance and understanding, Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) and nonviolent resistance, and poetry and stories and

literature did not help us or protect us against death and destruction. My motto “This too shall pass” became a joke to many. My mantra “A poem is mightier than a gun” was mocked. With my own office gone by wanton Israeli destruction, students would not stop joking about me developing PMDs, “Poems of Mass Destruction,” or TMDs, “Theories of Mass Destruction.” Students joked that they wanted to be taught chemical poetry alongside allegorical and narrative poetry. They asked for short-range stories and long-range stories instead of normal terms like short stories and novels. And I was asked if my exams would have questions capable of carrying chemical warheads!

But why would Israel bomb a university? Some say Israel attacked IUG just to punish its twenty thousand students or to push Palestinians to despair. While that is true, to me IUG’s only danger to the Israeli occupation and its apartheid regime is that it is the most important place in Gaza to develop students’ minds as indestructible weapons. Knowledge is Israel’s worst enemy. Awareness is Israel’s most hated and feared foe. That’s why Israel bombs a university: it wants to kill openness and determination to refuse living under injustice and racism. But again, why does Israel bomb a school? Or a hospital? Or a mosque? Or a twenty-story building? Could it be, as Shylock put it, “a merry sport”?

Personal Loss

In my *New York Times* piece titled “My Child Asks: Can Israel Destroy Our Building If the Power Is Out?,” printed on May 13, 2021, I wrote that my wife, Nusayba, and I are a perfectly normal Palestinian couple—we have over thirty relatives killed by Israel in the past two decades.

One of Israel’s most heinous onslaughts against Gaza in 2014 was the massacre of Shuja’iyya, a neighborhood adjacent to the border with Israel east of Gaza City. Shuja’iyya is one of the most populated areas in the world with over one hundred thousand people, mostly children, living on a very small patch of land. During the massacre, Israel bombarded the area

for ten hours, nonstop. At dawn, the shelling stopped, giving people a bit of time to run for their lives—only for the shelling to resume. The images of the elderly, women, children, and young people dead in the streets and in the safety of their homes still haunt us all.

Among the people Israel murdered in 2014 was my brother Mohammed. Israel widowed his wife and orphaned his two kids, Raneem and Hamza. Israel also killed four members of my extended family. Our family home was destroyed, and so were the homes of my uncles and relatives. Nusayba lost her brother, grandfather, and cousin. But the most horrific massacre happened when Israel targeted my wife's sister's home. Israel killed Nusayba's sister, three of her sister's kids, and her sister's husband, leaving Amal and Abood injured and orphaned. The rest of the family members were injured and had to be dug out from under the rubble. Nusayba's father's home and her brothers' homes were destroyed, too.

The wounds Israel inflicted in the hearts of Palestinians are not irreparable. We have no choice but to recover, stand up again, and continue the struggle. Submitting to the occupation is a betrayal to humanity and to all struggles around the world.

At the end of the day, nothing Palestinians or those who support Palestine do will please Israel or the Zionist lobby. And Israeli aggression will continue unabated. BDS. Armed Struggle. Peace talks. Protests. Tweets. Social media. Poetry. All are terror in Israel's books. Even Archbishop Desmond Tutu, hailed by most people as a champion of justice not only against apartheid South Africa but racial segregation everywhere, especially in Palestine, was slandered as a bigot and an antisemite. Renowned actor Emma Watson was attacked and accused of antisemitism for daring to post in support of Palestine solidarity on Instagram. It is not surprising then that Refaat Alareer or Ali Abunimah or Steven Salaita or Susan Abulhawa or Mohammed or Muna El-Kurd or Remi Kanazi is constantly attacked by Zionist trolls who wrongly use the antisemitism slander against us. No matter how mild the criticism of Israel's crimes or how slight the support for Palestinian rights, the Zionist lobby will attempt to scorch the earth to prevent that. This is further evidence that Israel is not

merely after Palestinian armed resistance, but it is also after the very existence of Palestinians.

I know that many Palestinians ask if more can be done, if free people can do more to prevent Israel from continuing to commit horrifying crimes against us. Can popular resistance, or armed struggle, or BDS, or pro-Palestine groups like Jewish Voice for Peace, or Black Lives Matter activists or indigenous struggle activists, do more to exert pressure and prevent further Israeli aggressions, to bring those Israeli war criminals to justice and to end their impunity? When will this pass? When will it be enough? How many dead Palestinians are enough? How many massacres are enough?

I recoil in horror and shudder as I write this—I am exposed, naked, and vulnerable. Reliving the horrors Israel brought on us is one thing, but disclosing your life and your most intimate moments of fear and terror, where you spill your heart out, is another. Sometimes late at night when insomnia hits, I wonder if it is all worth it, if anything will ever change.

When I was approached to write for this book, the promise was that it will effect change and that policies, especially in the United States, will be improved. But, honestly, will they? Does a single Palestinian life matter? Does it?

Reader, as you peruse these chapters, what can or will you do, knowing that what you do can save lives and can change the course of history? Reader, will you make this matter?

Gaza is not and should not be a priority only when Israel is shedding Palestinian blood en masse. Gaza, as the epitome of the Palestinian Nakba, is suffocating and being butchered right in front of our eyes and often live on TV or on social media.

It shall pass, I keep hoping. It shall pass, I keep saying. Sometimes I mean it. Sometimes I don’t. And as Gaza keeps gasping for life, we struggle for it to pass, we have no choice but to fight back and to tell her stories. For Palestine.

On the shores of the Mediterranean,
I saw humanity drenched in salt,
Face down,
Dead,
Eyes gouged,
Hands up to the sky, praying,
Or trembling in fear.
I could not tell.
The sea, harsher than the heart of an Arab, Dances,
Soaked with blood.
Only the pebbles wept.
Only the pebbles.
“All the perfumes of Arabia will not”
grace the rot
Israel breeds.

A Palestinian man taking a photo of a George Floyd mural in Gaza City. June 16, 2020. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

On Why We Still Hold Onto Our Phones and Keep Recording

Asmaa Abu Mezied

Why would someone running from falling Israeli missiles or huddled together with their family next to the rubble of a neighbor's destroyed home, surrounded by artillery shelling, be holding their phones to record the horror around them? (I have often seen these questions on social media, which displays an utter disregard for Palestinian suffering.)

I am writing this for us, not for them.

We hold onto our phones for dear life because we have learned the hard way that documenting what we are going through is very important to ensure that our narrative remains alive and remains ours. Our stories, our struggle and pain, and the atrocities committed against us for more than seven decades are being erased. The Israeli journalist Hagar Shezaf explained how Israeli Defense Ministry teams systematically removed historic documents from Israeli archives, which describe the killing of Palestinians, the demolition of their villages and the expulsion of entire Palestinian communities.[1] This is part of Israel's attempt to constantly rewrite history in its favor. So, we hold tight to our phones and record.

We record to resist the labeling of our people as unworthy, if not inhuman, by the so-called "objective" Western media, which can barely say our names and tell our stories. We are always portrayed as terrorists, violent people—or as numbers, abstract and formless. We are repeatedly asked to prove our humanity so media channels can give us a few seconds of airtime.

So, we record to document not for their sake but for ours. We have been systematically brainwashed by the media to apologize for demanding

justice. There is no gray area in calls for freedom or equality.

We hold onto our phones and leave the camera rolling, recording our tears, our screams at losing our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and children, our anguish, our attempts to run for our lives, our crippling fears, our powerlessness to calm our children when our houses shake with the deafening sound of death delivered by F-35 missiles sent with love from the US government.

We hold onto that phone and leave the camera rolling to preserve our tormented calls to our mothers to stay alive under the rubble of our destroyed homes, our voices crying goodbye to our loved ones at their graves, trying to sound strong but failing, betrayed by our trembling lips and tear-filled eyes.

We must record our prayers to survive, our children's joy when they find their toys intact and their pets alive. We record our strength and our vulnerability, our disappointment in our leadership, and our rage at the silence of the world. We record the smoke, the blood, the lost homes, the olive trees targeted, and livelihoods stolen. We record how much we aged and how much we continue to love life even though life doesn't love us back.

We record for future generations, to tell them this is what truly happened. That we stood here, demanded our rights, fought for them, and were annihilated. We record not to humanize ourselves for others, but so that future generations will remember who we were and what we did . . . to warn them against all attempts at erasing our existence.

We record our plea for humanity's help to end this horror, which is more than our cameras can bear.

A Palestinian woman waves a Palestinian flag during a protest east of Khan Younis near the separation fence between the Gaza Strip and Israel. May 14, 2018. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Breaking the Vicious Cycle of Permanent Temporality

Shahd Abusalama

Before 1948, the indigenous Palestinians could easily meet in Jerusalem's old city, Jaffa's market, or Gaza's beaches despite successive colonization. The Israeli campaign of ethnic cleansing during the 1947–49 Nakba (catastrophe) fundamentally changed Palestine's landscapes and demographics, with 531 Palestinian villages and towns completely depopulated and destroyed, and the rest segregated from one another by electric fences and military checkpoints, making such encounters nearly impossible.[1] Indeed, ever since, Palestinians have experienced an uninterrupted Nakba with more catastrophic events, deepening our geographical and socio-political fragmentation and sustaining the long imperial tradition that began before the establishment of the State of Israel.

"Permanent temporality" is a concept used to describe the experience of exile for refugees in general, and it applies to Palestinian refugees in particular.[2] Palestinian refugees live in refugee camps, where they are locked in limbo, as if suspended in space and time, as they hold on to the right of return that remains firmly denied by the Israeli state. Although most of the world moved to the postcolonial formation after World War II, Palestinian refugees have been subjugated to a perpetual cycle of settler-colonial violence since 1948, with no justice or accountability, which only reinforces this vicious cycle and denies the refugee camps' political status and social significance as spaces for reclamation.

Gaza's unique history of repression and resistance since 1948 offers a microcosm for this ongoing Nakba and its devastating ramifications, which has made encounters between different communities of Palestine only possible in exceptional circumstances such as prison or other forms of displacement. At a time when the world is hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and Europeans are experiencing unprecedented uncertainties and restrictions on rights they have long taken for granted, it is an opportune time to show how these restrictions are a mere shadow of the oppression that has long defined our lives under Israel's systems of setter colonialism and apartheid.

The story of my best friend, Louay Odeh, is a good example of the multiple forms of collective imprisonment Israel enacts against Palestinians.[3] Louay was born in Jerusalem in September 1978, but October 18, 2011, became his "second birthday." That was the day he experienced the unthinkable: overnight, he found himself in besieged Gaza, where he had no family or memories, just a deep connection that evolves from a "normal" desire to visit parts of our homeland, marked by the impossibility of that pursuit for most Palestinians. After ten years of captive resistance in Israeli jails, his long-awaited release was designated to the Gaza Strip as part of a prisoner exchange. Hamas, the dominant political party governing Gaza, struck an agreement with Israel to release the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, captured in 2006, in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian political prisoners. During the five years of Shalit's abduction and captivity, Israel had turned our lives into a living hell under siege and frequent bombardments, but this swap deal almost represented the light at the end of the tunnel.

Amid exceptional joy in a paradoxical moment of victory alongside unlivable socioeconomic conditions, I joined crowds who gathered to greet over 300 freed prisoners, 164 of whom Israel destined to exile in Gaza, like Louay, even though they did not come from there. This contravened the Fourth Geneva Convention, which states that "individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied

territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive."[4]

For better or worse, our lives—Louay's and mine—intersected during the festivals of freedom that rocked every corner of that coastal enclave for weeks. In one particular celebration a few days after the beginning of Louay's freedom/exile, we learned that our families' lives had intersected in an equally unthinkable setting. My father, Ismail, who had been detained from Jabalia Refugee Camp in Gaza in 1972, and Louay's uncle, Yacoub Odeh, who had been detained from Jerusalem in 1969, met in Beersheba prison in 1974.[5] They were moved together to Nafha prison in 1980, "an exceptional place, especially designed to break the spirit of prisoners," as described by Amnon Kapeliouk, cofounder of the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem.[6] Kapeliouk wrote that Nafha contained what Israel deemed "the 'cream' of the Palestinian prisoners," who experienced even more "unbearable conditions" than those in Beersheba prison.[7] The Palestinian prisoners maintained their defiance in Nafha until their life sentences were suspended in a 1985 swap deal: Palestinian resistance struck an agreement with Israel to release 1,150 political detainees from Israeli jails in return for three Israeli soldiers captured during the First Lebanon War. Three years after the defeat and expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Palestinians finally enjoyed a fleeting taste of victory.

Little did my dad and Yacoub know that Gaza would host their reunion, twenty-six years later at Louay's freedom festival in October 2011. It would have been a one-hour drive between Jerusalem and Gaza, were there no Israeli military checkpoints, segregation, walls, and restrictions on movement. But actually, to see Louay, Yacoub had to join Louay's parents on a two-day journey by bus from Jerusalem to Eilat, and then to Taba in Egypt, and then to Gaza through the Rafah Border Crossing. Those exceptional circumstances made celebrations even more compelling; we lived the "impossible" temporary with the utmost joy, as if it were the experience of a lifetime.

My parents were hyperaware that Louay and the other exiled ex-detainees were experiencing a whole new world in Gaza. However, many on the receiving end, who have never seen a different world other than Gaza, were experiencing the same through their eyes. For example, I belong to the young population of Gaza who grew up in the aftermath of the US-mediated 1993 Oslo peace agreement between Israel and the PLO. With questions of return, land, and sovereignty pushed to the margins by the Gulf War, and the Palestinian liberation struggle turning into a struggle for statehood, Edward Said condemned the Oslo Accords as "an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles."[8] As Israel maintained the occupation while absolving itself of responsibility toward the occupied, Said concluded that the PLO "will end up guarding the world'[9]" I was born into that prison during the height of the First Intifada (1987–93), whose fire was extinguished with the Oslo Accords. The agreement's promises of autonomy soon proved delusional and divisive, politically and otherwise. For many of us, brought up in the shadow of Oslo, the freedom/exile of prisoners like Louay marked the first time we would meet a real person from Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jenin, or any other part of Palestine.

Family conversations with Louay often turned into comparisons between the lives of political prisoners and those of the Palestinians in Gaza, pointing to similar worlds of different magnitudes, which distinctly shape their behavioral psychologies. Palestinian prisoners survive day by day. Like the Palestinians in Gaza, they know that uncertainty is the only certainty. They could wake up in Nafha prison and sleep in Beersheba. Family visits can be denied at any minute. Products available today may not be available tomorrow. Their behaviors are adapted accordingly. For example, some end up stocking pens although they don't write, just in case they decide someday to learn the craft. Similarly, Palestinians in Gaza may stock goods and products that they may not need in the moment, knowing that they may not find them later. Some store huge quantities of cement although they are not building, and others store large amounts of fuel although gas stations are numerous. Both are aware that the conditions that

trap them in captivity with basic rights denied are designed to break their will and desire for freedom, and are not sustainable and can change any moment, not necessarily for the better. Detainees risk their lives on hunger strikes demanding basic rights; similarly, Palestinians in Gaza protest at the fence separating the Strip from Israel, knowing that Israeli repression can be lethal. Both have nothing to lose but a life of indignity. No laws apply in the worlds of prisoners and Gaza except the unknown and unexpected, as ruled by external powers beyond their control.

As I look back at our intersecting and yet uniquely different histories, in the context of the collective Palestinian experience of oppression and resistance, Louay and I are today both miles away from our families in Palestine. A decade ago, when we crossed paths, neither expected that we would be on a journey of a different struggle. This journey is beyond the scope of this chapter but is deeply intertwined with the persisting realities of life in Gaza, which led many in my close circle in Gaza, including Louay, some of my siblings, cousins, and childhood friends, to be dispersed across Europe. Our presence in Europe, however, allowed us to meet more fragments of Palestine than we ever imagined in Palestine itself, all heavily invested in the Palestinian cause and doing everything possible to reintegrate our fragmented selves and overcome our feelings of helplessness as we watch from afar our people being collectively punished under the world's watch for simply existing. This very distance from the daily issues of survival in Gaza and elsewhere generated a more mature understanding of the multiple actors inside and outside Gaza which led us to where we are today.

Since the Oslo Accords, Palestinian refugees, who have long headed the front line of resistance from their dispersed exiles, have been caught in the political wilderness, while Israeli settlements expand at an increasingly fast pace, imprisoning Palestinian communities into ever-shrinking Bantustans[10] under innovative strategies of repression and control.[11] The hypocrisy underlying these peace negotiations is evident in the Gaza Strip, which Israel had "already encircled with an electric fence in 1994 as part of

the preparation for peace with the Palestinians."[12] The Second Intifada, which broke out in 2000 and led to Louay's detention, is the best popular expression of the utter failure of the peace process. The Israeli occupation used the intifada as a pretext to consolidate Gaza's segregation from the rest of Palestine.

However, the mainstream discourse on Palestine-Israel remains in denial of the enduring injustices on the ground, as clearly demonstrated in the peace plan introduced in 2020 and touted by some as the "Deal of the Century," which Israel dictated and the Trump administration sponsored with support from Arab dictatorships. This happened despite the flagrant violations of international law that accompanied Trump's "peace-making," such as his unilateral recognition of illegally annexed Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the attempt to redefine who counts as a refugee, and the defunding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), on which most refugees depend for their very survival.[13] Although fundamental aspects of the Palestinian struggle were ignored in Israel's favor, the sponsors still expected the Palestinians to be grateful for the crumbs Israel would give up and the promised billions of dollars. These crackdowns on the Palestinian cause show that the imperialist culture behind the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine is still alive.

How can we break free from the vicious circle that traps us and our families in a state of permanent temporality? How can we protect future generations from undergoing the same experiences? These are questions that haunt Palestinians wherever they are and have kept the flame of our liberation struggle lit. While most drastically exemplified in Gaza, the explosive situation is haunting Palestinians in all their exiles. Palestinians are facing more waves of expulsion as upheavals hit their host countries and Gaza has already parted with tens of thousands of young people who sought asylum in Europe in the last decade.

Our circumstances are reminiscent of those in the 1950s and 1960s when exiled Palestinians, far from the imposed boundaries and restrictions, came

together to form a collective liberation vision in the diaspora. This vision, born of shared suffering and exile, reaffirmed to the old and young that a future cannot be imagined without the realization of justice in Palestine, mainly through the actualization of their internationally recognized right of return. Therefore, a decolonial strategy recentered on the core issues, those that were marginalized in the interests of realpolitik, is needed. To understand our reality and be able to project a vision of a just future for our people, a critical examination of historical narratives of Palestinian life and struggle is necessary, and Gaza provides an enlightening case study.

The Palestinians' Encounter with Western Imperialism and Humanitarianism

The State of Israel exists on top of ethnically cleansed Palestine, and is able to do so because of a wider multifaceted power structure, rationalized through centuries-old imperial discourse, which Said called "Orientalism,"[14] Founded after nearly a century of European "peaceful crusades" to Palestine, it is predicated on a Christian-Zionist orientalist culture that advocated for "the restoration of Jews" to "redeem" the "Holy Land."[15] In nineteenth-century Europe, amid rising ethnic nationalism and colonial expansion across the non-European world, the religious associations embedded in dogmatic textual readings of the Bible, along with supremacist cultural and political attitudes toward Arabs, combined to represent Palestine as timeless, unchanged since Christ's day, and the Palestinian natives as "a source of contamination."[16] They were not only "primitive," like other colonized peoples, but also rootless "wanderers" in the desert. These portrayals had the effect of undermining Palestinian claims to their ancestral lands and facilitating their replacement with a new population supposedly "returning" to its historic "promised land."[17] This history laid the essential foundations for the Zionist Jewish state, later conceptualized by the Austro-Hungarian Jewish father of modern Zionism,

Theodor Herzl, who in 1895 noted in his diaries that "the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor [the natives of Palestine] must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly."[18] This vision was enshrined in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which pledged Britain's support for "a national home for the Jewish people," in complete disregard for the indigenous Palestinian majority, whose demographics and landscapes subsequently underwent traumatic changes amid broken promises of independence.[19]

With the establishment of the State of Israel, Gaza was completely transformed with around two hundred thousand refugees, a quarter of the total number of Palestinian refugees, expelled from their homes and forced into the narrow strip alongside Gaza's pre-1948 population of eighty thousand.[20] The 1949 armistice agreement between Israel and Egypt, which ended the fighting, outlined the "provisional" boundaries of the modern Gaza Strip, a much smaller territory than the Gaza district under the Ottoman and British empires. In the absence of an Arab Palestinian state, this new Gaza Strip came under Egyptian administration.[21] The armistice agreement had deadly consequences for the Gaza Strip. Moreover, the fence erected between Gaza and Israel was placed within the Strip, shrinking its size markedly and offering a pretext to kill thousands of Gaza refugees who crossed the fence to return to their lands and homes. They were simply exercising their right of return but were framed as "hostile infiltrators." According to historian Benny Morris, "as many as 5000" civilian Palestinian returnees were killed "by the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], police, and civilians along Israel's borders between 1949 and 1956."[22]

The Anglo-American humanitarian agencies that offered relief aid to Palestinian refugees arrived in Gaza with a deeply rooted orientalist ideology and functioned in a power structure that condoned the unethical legitimacy of newly established Israel.[23] The United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), which was created through UN General Assembly Resolution 194, guaranteeing the Palestinian right to

return and compensation, and its branches—the Economic Survey Mission (ESM, also known as the "Clapp Mission") and UNRWA—acted on the assumption that return was unrealistic.[24] To the Palestinians, however, nothing could be more unrealistic than expecting the refugees to abandon the hope of returning to their homes or achieving a lasting peace without the realization of their right of return. In Gaza, this was expressed in various ways, much of which can be traced in the archives of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC, often referred to in Gaza as "the Quakers"), which was invited by the UN to manage Gaza's relief system in December 1948. Overwhelmed by the new Palestinian refugee population, whose situation then was, according to the World Council of Churches' expert on refugees, markedly "more pathetic" than the European refugee crisis, the UN benefited from the support of AFSC, which was reputable for its assistance to refugee populations in Europe during World War II.[25]

The European refugee crisis was instrumental in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 Nakba, especially in Gaza, given that, at this critical moment after World War II, the international refugee regime was undergoing consolidation. Daniel Cohen highlights the deep "moral" connection between displaced persons in Europe, who consisted of Jewish and non-Jewish Eastern European refugees, and the displaced Palestinians, a connection that was ignored in the name of "neutrality regarding the respective claims of Arabs and Jews."[26] As the regime of humanitarianism separated politics from relief in the name of being neutral, this very separation, which lingers in today's treatment of the Palestinians, is, in fact, political. This proclaimed "neutrality" had the effect of neutralizing international responses to the injustices inflicted on the Palestinians, with grave consequences.

In this section, I revisit the approach of the Quakers' leadership to the Palestinian refugees within this consolidating discourse, based on original research in the AFSC archives and a comprehensive review of relevant scholarship. Although potentially disappointing to the Palestinians, Quakers, and humanitarians alike, and reflective of usually existent gaps

between leadership and grassroots movements, this discussion is important, as only a process of self-reflection and correction can help us move to a future where social justice reigns.

The aforementioned “neutrality” can be traced in an op-ed by Clarence Pickett, then executive secretary of AFSC. Picket’s piece, published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on March 20, 1949, on one hand warned against the use of Palestinian refugees “for political bargaining” as a requirement for a serious discussion of their repatriation, stressing the “temporary” nature of relief, and the Palestinian refugees’ utmost desire “to return to their homes and live their own lives.”[27] On the other hand, he emphasized as a top priority the need to “help the refugees themselves to view their situation realistically.” By “realistically,” Pickett meant that refugees must accept that “‘home’ is now the Jewish State of Israel.” He noted that “most refugees are farmers, and most of them farmed their little plots of land as they were farmed in the time of Jesus.” But, to Pickett’s understanding, their homeland is “a different country now . . . a modern state, a state that is becoming more and more industrialized and a state which will insist, for its own material survival, that every plot of land be used to produce the maximum amount possible.” Pickett concluded that Palestinian refugees “must realize that they are facing an industrial revolution and must be willing to make the adjustments necessary.” Whether conscious or unconscious, Pickett’s analysis implied an imperialist attitude that favored the “advanced” Zionist colonizer over the “ backward” Palestinian peasants, whose survival came second to that of newborn Israel. In addition, this differentiation between modern Jewish and primitive Arab communities constituted the latter as subordinate or even unworthy of discussion, undermining centuries of Palestinian Arab civilization and cultivation of the land and underplaying the disruptive effects of Jewish colonial expansion on the identity of the landscape.

Perhaps the same mentality was behind AFSC leadership’s view of Israel’s proposal in May 1949 to absorb the population of the Gaza Strip including the refugees as “a fairly good idea,” but an idea that needed a

more “attractive” reasoning than the Israeli security–related justifications for territorial expansion.[28] These examples, in fact, are symptomatic of the postwar humanitarian turn toward secularism and philo-semitism, which, affected by previous decades of Christian-Zionist discourse, reconciled a “conflicting empathy by framing the Palestinian refugee problem as a humanitarian tragedy and a religious call to action” while exonerating the Jewish state of responsibility.[29] However, the basic right to live safely in your home and your homeland is meant to be universal, not exclusive to the powerful or the rich. This was the understanding of the refugees who repeatedly communicated their rejection of partial return and resettlement, as evident in the AFSC archives. When the Quakers pointed out that their return might be impossible, the refugees hoped that “true ‘Democracy’ which is claimed by everybody does not allow such a thing.”[30]

To the disappointment of Palestinian refugees, the kind of democracy that was adopted by the Western states did not account for their rights. These sentiments are echoed in a letter dated October 12, 1949, from the AFSC’s Gaza Unit, sent on behalf of the Palestinian refugees in Gaza because of their inability to communicate with the outside world, which stated “their opinions and thinking at the present time”:

> They [Gaza refugees] feel strongly that the United Nations are responsible for their plight and therefore have the total responsibility to feed, house, clothe, and **repatriate** them [emphasis added] There is some sentiment that once the United Nations leaves the area, the matter could be finished by war: “Therefore, why don’t you leave us”—runs this line of thought. Above all else, they desire to go home . . . back to their lands and villages, which in many cases are very close. Apparently, they do not hesitate to go back to the changed culture which is growing in Israel. This desire naturally continues to be the strongest demand they make; sixteen months of exile has not diminished it. Without it, they would have nothing for which to live. It is expressed in many ways and forms every day. “Why keep us alive?” is one expression of it. It is as genuine and deep as a man’s longing for

his home can be. In the minds of refugees, resettlement is not even considered.[31]

AFSC withdrew from direct relief in the Gaza Strip on May 1, 1950, when UNRWA took over the relief operations. AFSC stressed, as stated in a March 1949 report to the UN: "It is obvious that prolonged direct relief contributes to the moral degeneration of the refugees and that it may also, by its palliative effects, militate against a swift political settlement of the problem."[32] While the Quakers' stance is admirable, UNRWA would do exactly what the Quakers feared, subsequently engaging "much more closely with the idea of settling the refugees permanently outside Palestine" than repatriating them, trapping the Palestinians in a cycle of survival, dependency, and a state of permanent temporality.[33]

To be sure, the legacy of imperialism and colonialism that shaped the international refugee regime in the immediate aftermath of the Nakba has contributed to the exclusion of the Palestinians from the human rights discourse. This legacy also continues to shape much of the present-day racial and economic inequalities in a seemingly "postcolonial" world that affirms the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and champions freedom and democracy. Despite the visibility of the ensuing contradictions, especially in Palestine, which remains colonized, the Palestinian predicament is increasingly and disturbingly normalized, consolidating a hierarchy of human rights that guarantees Israel unprecedented impunity. For instance, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which has been a major agent in the expansionist settler-colonial strategy of Israel since the turn of the twentieth century, enjoys international legitimacy, with charitable status and awards for its "environmental" and "humanitarian" causes. Notwithstanding the negative attitudes that subjugated European Jews to centuries of antisemitism, the roles have been reversed in Palestine, with the Occidental Jew replicating supremacist attitudes against the indigenous Palestinians, in the name of God and the Bible. Meanwhile, while the JNF continues to confiscate Palestinian lands for exclusive Jewish use and

organizes “birthright trips” for “returning” Jews worldwide, racist Israeli laws and military actions have systematically blocked the return of Palestinian refugees, who remain stateless to this day.

The Palestinian Revolution: A Vision Unrealized

Reflecting on his memories of the Nakba, the intellectual Jabra I. Jabra, who was born in Bethlehem in 1919 and lived through multiple exiles after 1948 until he died in Iraq in 1994, foresaw that “the dislodged population was to be deliberately called ‘refugees’ [so] that the horrific political and human issue would be so twisted that the maximum response it might elicit from a then weary world would be some act of charity, if at all.”[34] At worst, a demographic bomb for Israel and “another demographic case for the United Nations.” Meanwhile, as universal sympathy had already been blunted in Israel’s favor by an evolving, ideologically constructed Western discourse, Israel’s exploitation of Europe’s guilt for the Holocaust consistently distracted from the systematic destruction and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, “soon to be hailed by hack novelists and propagandists in America and Europe as a heroic ‘return.’” Then, the victims, who paid a devastating price for a crime they didn’t commit, were told:

> You’re refugees, don’t make a nuisance of yourselves: we’ll do something about it. Refugee aid after a few months will trickle in: you’ll be numbered and housed in tattered tents and tin shacks. And try and forget, please. Hang on to your rocks wherever you are, and try to forget.[35]

Forgetting, however, was, in Jabra’s words, “unthinkable” and, although Palestinians spread globally, they remained united with an “unshakable” desire for national liberation amid feelings of exile and loss, even within their homeland. Jabra was among the exiled intellectuals, writers, and artists who had begun to process what they endured in 1948 in their works by the early 1950s and who raised their voices “in anger, not in lamentation,” backed by resourceful and versatile actions toward their end goal: return.[36]

The 1948 Nakba did not eradicate Palestinian culture, but did transform it. Although culture, art, music, literature, and every other form of indigenous expression of a people under settler-colonialism are often sidelined by the more pressing issues of daily violence and survival, this does not imply their absence. In a harsh reality where the boundaries between the personal, the collective, and the political blur, Palestinians could not separate the aesthetic from the political in their cultural and artistic productions, as expressed in the literary works of Samira Azzam and Ghassan Kanafani, the paintings of Ismail Shammout and Ibrahim Ghannam, the cartoons of Naji al-Ali, the poetry of Ibrahim and Fadwa Touqan, Mahmoud Darwish, and Samih el-Qasem, and Palestinian songs, folklore, and cinema. In fact, as Kanafani argues, this is part of an uninterrupted historical series that never disappeared in the course of the Palestinians' struggle against British and Zionist colonialism.[37]

The Nakba generation firmly believed in the potential for culture to shape agential, subjective, and collective identities, and actively sought to form a new language, compatible with the lived experiences of the Palestinians and their national ambitions. Their productions succeeded in cultivating political awareness among Palestinians, Arabs, and international citizens of the world, while challenging existing misconceptions and misrepresentations, intellectually and rhetorically. Subsequent Palestinian generations grew up with their revolutionary cultural heritage, which actively participated in representing and conceptualizing the Palestinian global revolution, spearheaded by the PLO throughout 1968–82. They turned the desperation born of the 1948 and 1967 ethnic cleansing campaigns against the Palestinians into hope. After two decades of being dispossessed, demeaned, demonized, and disregarded, the Palestinian liberation movement, despite sources of political and economic instability that pushed the movement into different exiles, from Jordan to Lebanon to Tunisia, used all the means available (literature, education, armed struggle, films, art, etc.) to fight for our rights and recognition. The people's shared struggles, regardless of class, religion, political affiliation, or gender, helped

foster the movement and make it resonate internationally, empowered by revolutions striking imperialism on all fronts, from Algeria to Cuba, the United States to Vietnam. This generation provided a wealth of liberation ideologies and practices from which we can learn and imagine the possibilities, available now, that could lead us to emancipation and defeat settler-colonialism in Palestine.

Central to the consciousness of the Palestinian in the 1960s and 1970s, as Said describes, was "an acute grasp of [political] *effectiveness*, an awareness of what one was, where one stood, how one conducted one's struggle in the present which was viewed both as the product of the past and as the producer of a new future."[38] Palestinian liberation aesthetics were fundamentally shaped by this awareness, which Gaza expressed in more practical ways. Notwithstanding the accumulative pain inflicted on its mostly refugee people within its long-isolated enclave, Gaza has inspired hope for Palestinians beyond the boundaries of Palestine.

A relevant example is "Letter from Gaza," one of the earliest works of Palestinian fiction dedicated to Gaza, which Kanafani wrote in 1955 as he was turning twenty years old.[39] Kanafani wrote the story in the voice of a Palestinian refugee returning to his devastated Shuja'iyya neighborhood in Gaza after working for a few years in Kuwait. Instead of leaving and taking up the invitation of his US-based childhood friend Mustafa for the option of flight and individual survival, the protagonist decides to stay, making a compelling case for collective survival. He tells Mustafa that Gaza remains unchanged after "seven years of defeat" (1948–55): "closed like the introverted lining of a rusted snail-shell, thrown up by the waves on the sticky, sandy shore by the slaughter-house. This Gaza was more cramped than the mind of a sleeper in the throes of a fearful nightmare, with its narrow streets which had their bulging balconies . . . this Gaza!" He wonders about "the ill-defined tie we have with Gaza which blunted our enthusiasm for flight," and "the obscure causes that draw a man to his family, his house, his memories" without exactly knowing the answer. His question is answered by his thirteen-year-old niece, Nadia, who lost her leg

in a selfless act to protect her younger siblings from bombs falling on their house. He recalls his encounter with Nadia at her hospital bed, after which he experienced Gaza differently, dressed in the color of blood and piles of stones, signifying revolution. He then tells Mustafa, “Gaza was brand new”; it now promised what seemed to him the beginning of a new stage in Palestinian collective life:

> I imagined that the main street that I walked along on the way back home was only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad. Everything in this Gaza throbbed with sadness which was not confined to weeping. It was a challenge: more than that—it was something like reclamation of the amputated leg![40]

The protagonist ends his letter by proclaiming that he will stay. He urges Mustafa to return to “the ugly debris of defeat” and learn from “Nadia’s leg, amputated from the top of the thigh, what life is and what existence is worth.”

“Letter from Gaza” has not aged; it remains relevant today and shows the blurry line between Palestinian realism and fiction, especially when pondering the consistent and unprecedented annihilation of the Palestinian body in Gaza that continues today. Similarly, Mahmoud Darwish’s prose poem “Silence for Gaza” (1973) identifies Gaza’s undying resistance against the occupation, “the only value for the occupied,” as the reason “the enemy hates it to death and fears it to criminality, and tries to sink it into the sea, the desert, or blood.” Both authors use Gaza’s unique history of oppression and resistance to call for action: Kanafani uses Gaza as a case from which we can learn “what existence is worth,” while Darwish warns of glorifying Gaza to the extent of betrayal:

> We do injustice to Gaza when we turn it into a myth, because we will hate it when we discover that it is no more than a small poor city that resists. . . . If we had dignity, we would break all our mirrors and cry or curse it if we refuse to revolt against ourselves. We do injustice to

> Gaza if we glorify it, because being enchanted by it will take us to the edge of waiting and Gaza doesn't come to us. Gaza does not liberate us. Gaza has no horses, airplanes, magic wands, or offices in capital cities. Gaza liberates itself from our attributes, language, and invaders at the same time.[41]

Darwish's words are equally timeless, especially in light of the escalating violence against Gaza in recent decades. As scholars Darryl Li and Jean-Pierre Filiu separately argued, the Israeli occupation not only rendered Gaza a ghetto but as a "laboratory" to experiment with different ways of annihilating the Palestinian body, "saving on the military, human, and financial costs of direct control, while maintaining authority over who and what could come in or out of Gaza, and when."[42] The Oslo Accords and Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005, when Israel unilaterally pulled out its troops and settlers, ending thirty-eight years of direct settlement and military rule over Gaza, may give the impression that Israel's chokehold is waning, but the opposite is true. The "disengagement" is an expression of Israel's dilemma, in which the Palestinians, who must not be granted equality but who cannot be removed or exterminated en masse, are marketed as necessary for Israel's national security, in line with a long-standing strategy of "blaming the victim."[43]

Gaza remains the amputated poor city on Palestine's southern Mediterranean coast, besieged from land, sea, and air, and subjected to frequent bombardments that leave thousands killed, more injured, and many more displaced. This brutality, which in Israeli parlance is viewed clinically as an act of "mowing the lawn," shapes the experience of time and life in Gaza, and pushes its people to constantly explode: "It is neither death, nor suicide. It is Gaza's way of declaring that it deserves to live."[44] While Nadia's amputated leg stands as a powerful metaphor for Israel's scarring of Palestinian bodies and lands, the call for "reclamation" and the affirmation of life is constantly revived in Gaza.

A good example of this buoyancy is the Great March of Return, which was begun by Gaza's refugee population, who make up over 73 percent of its inhabitants, on March 30, 2018. That day marks Palestinian Land Day, when six Palestinian citizens of Israel were killed in 1976 for protesting Israeli expropriation of their lands in the Galilee, Naqab (Negev), and Wadi Ara. The mass protests attracted tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza from multiple generations, genders, professions, and political affiliations. They continued to protest at the separating fence one Friday after another, despite Israel's brutal repression of unarmed civilians. They held tents carrying the names of the original villages and towns that they were expelled from in 1948, reaffirming their freedom and right of return. Their cries for justice in the form of creative popular resistance, erupting on this particular day, reaffirmed Gazans as inseparable from other Palestinians on the other side of the fence, and further exposed a continuing Israeli ethnic cleansing campaign that targets the dispersed Palestinian communities all over historic Palestine.

To Israel, however, there are "no civilians in Gaza," as announced by Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's defense minister (2016–18), who resigned after Israel agreed to a cease-fire with Palestinian militias that he characterized as "surrendering to terror." Denying the presence of civilians in Gaza justified the brutal repression of the Great March of Return, including the indiscriminate killing of children, women, journalists, and paramedics. Lieberman's statement is no more chilling than that of his successor Benny Gantz, who centered his election campaign for Israeli prime minister in 2019 on the IDF's record of sending parts of Gaza "back to the Stone Age."[45] The same applies to Israel's control over Gazans' access to food, healthcare, clean water, fuel, and electricity, and its expulsion of political prisoners like Louay to the Gaza Strip. These are the realities that push people to face their jailers "with bare chests," as Palestinians often describe their resistance tactics, given the disparity of military power between occupier and occupied, and propel them to continue to attend the weekly

demonstrations, despite the shocking numbers of casualties. They have nothing to lose but a life of indignity.

The interplay between the historical and contemporary politics, as enacted by Anglo-American humanitarian discourse, Palestinian revolutionary writers, and consistent mobilizations by ordinary Palestinians, makes a compelling case for alternative visions that take into account the realities on the ground as well as the contradictions that shape international responses to the Palestinian struggle. These visions are not imaginary, but make our own history. Many Palestinians still live by them, as they reflect survival and hope. While, in 1955, Kanafani only imagined a niece whose leg was being amputated in Gaza, in 1972, seventeen years later, Israeli agents installed a bomb in his car in Beirut, killing him and his favorite niece who sat beside him, Lamis Najem. Despite his life being cut short at the age of thirty-six, he left behind dozens of short stories, novels, plays, essays, and critical studies—much of which had international resonance. Kanafani's teaching experience at UNRWA schools in the 1950s made him note the incompatibility of the UNRWA curricula with the lived experience of the Palestinians.[46] Addressing a group of students in the early 1960s, Kanafani emphasized the importance of "correcting the march of history." To do that, it is necessary to study and apprehend history's dialectics and then "build a new historical era, in which the oppressed will live, after their liberation by revolutionary violence, from the contradiction that captivated them."[47]

Similar visions guided the exilic Palestinian cinema movement of revolution (1968–82), as it deployed the field of representation to challenge colonialist and humanitarian images that reduced Palestinians to either terrorists or helpless victims. Armed with a vision for "a people's cinema" and internationalist principles, pioneers of this militant cinema imagined not only a decolonized Palestine, but an anti-imperial, anti-capitalist world, as seen in *Declaration of World War* (1971), a documentary by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Japanese Red Army. Mostly using 16-millimeter cameras, very heavy and basic camera models that

produce black-and-white images, this form of cinema created a wealth of films despite the lack of freedoms and resources and all the political and economic precarities that accompany a revolution in progress.[48] For example, a film titled *Palestine in the Eye* (1977) celebrates the life of Hani Jawhariyah, a founding member of the Palestine Film Unit, who was killed while filming during the Lebanese Civil War.[49] Although this movement's revolutionary vision was not realized in the present, its artists made a mark in the Third Cinema movement and helped build political consciousness and agitate actions both locally and globally. They continued to inspire subsequent generations of Palestinian filmmakers and agents of cultural resistance under Israeli occupation.

Their political effectiveness is not only evident in the engagement of Palestinians' liberation aesthetics with this history and actuality, but also in the understanding of themselves as inseparable from the historical impact of Zionism.[50] This has deeply affected and even shaped the Palestinian counter-responses, including proposed political resolutions, such as the one-state vision that originated in the 1930s, put forth by the Palestinian Communist Party and later by Palestinian activists in the 1960s. This vision advocated for a secular democratic state in Palestine for Jews and Arabs, as opposed to one founded on Zionist ethnocentrism and religious and racial supremacist attitudes, which negated the Palestinians.[51] While the Oslo Accords sidelined this vision and adhered to a two-state proposition, a growing movement is reviving the call for a single state, with the "conflict" being replaced with a growing understanding of the complex systems of apartheid and settler-colonialism that rule historic Palestine, enabled by the international community's military, economic, and political support.

Setbacks and Breakthrough

The experiences, debates, and struggles through which we make our own history and present are tools of empowerment that we must study, learn

from, and adapt according to the needs of the battle for justice in Palestine, far from mainstream politics whose "realistic" framing is designed to favor Israel and its imperialist sensibilities. The fact that Western academia started recognizing the truth in the graphic testimonies of Palestinian refugees about their ethnic cleansing—thanks to Israel's New Historians, whose scholarship was predicated on British and Israeli government archival documents that were made public in the early 1980s— is a poignant reminder of Orientalism's deep roots, and that the first step of learning should be unlearning its legacy. Despite the continuing flow of evidence of Israel's criminality, the Palestinians are yet to receive their justice. As discussed above, Western claims of "realism" and "neutrality," which often obscured fundamental distinctions between the occupied and the occupier and the structural asymmetries between the two sides, effectively became colonial tools that have further emboldened Israeli impunity and restricted our quest for liberation.[52]

Several Palestinian initiatives continue to defy these reductive perceptions of the struggle and even offer insightful and tangible solutions, such as those detailed in *The Atlas of Palestine* by Salman Abu Sitta, whose village near Bir al-Saba' was attacked by a Zionist militia before the establishment of Israel and he subsequently found himself a child refugee in Gaza. Recognizing the continuity of Israeli ethnic cleansing in multiple forms and its unsustainability, he argues that "the central component of peace that is yet to come is reversing ethnic cleansing and implementing the right of every human being to return to his home."[53] Ever since he became a refugee, Abu Sitta has dedicated his life to mapping his return and that of all other refugees, by understanding the "legal, geographic, agricultural, demographic and economic aspects of the refugees' return" in light of historical and present facts.[54] His return plan, he argues, is not only sacred and entrenched in a comprehensive legal framework that has international consensus, but also feasible:

> Considering the success of the international operations of rescue and rehabilitation after the Second World War and considering the enormity of the Palestinian refugees' plight, it is

> imperative that the international community takes a firm stand. This should be made practically possible because the Palestinian question has by far the most comprehensive legal groundwork and uniform international consensus. It has been the major occupation of the UN since its inception. The UN can now act, with or without the long-denied support of Western powers, to implement international law and bring permanent peace to the Middle East.[55]

In Palestine, numerous grassroots movements are taking courageous actions against the establishment and sociopolitical norms, such as Tal3at (the grassroots Palestinian feminist movement), the Palestinian Youth Movement, and Palestinian Druze youth who are resisting compulsory service in the Israeli army, all of which see decolonizing the land and the mind as the way forward. Moreover, the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement is growing internationally, causing financial and reputational loss to the apartheid state and other governments and firms that support and profit from its colonial infrastructure. But BDS is often undermined by mainstream politics that attempts to equate any legitimate action against the apartheid state with the gruesome crime of antisemitism, in an effort to deflect criticism of Israeli oppression. The BDS movement is further threatened by token Palestinians who act as fig leaves by joining Israel's war against BDS and questioning its effectiveness, in order to cover their defeatism and complicity in enabling Israeli oppression.

The problem is no longer the lack of evidence against Israel's constructed myths or its powerful public relations, or even insufficient grassroots action, whether in Palestine or globally. The problem is that the international system is not prepared to truly listen to the cries of the Palestinians for justice amid immoral investment to maintain Israeli apartheid. The international system leveraged its power to make the Arab regimes complicit in perpetuating Israeli occupation. Later through the Oslo Accords, the PLO also became complicit. This is happening despite the unsustainable realities that trap us, with ramifications beyond the boundaries of historic Palestine, as seen elsewhere in the Middle East, in Kashmir, and even in the US. Israel is exporting innovative models of oppression to other dictators and oppressive regimes that are using these

“tested” methods against their unwanted Others, a situation that should worry every citizen of the world.

In her book *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, Rosemary Sayigh highlights that “one of the most striking characteristics of the Palestinian national struggles” has been the spontaneity of its uprisings and the problematic relationship between these and the national leadership.[56] Central to this problematic relationship is an increasing distrust of Palestinian leaders, many of whom acquired prestigious offices and positions in the Palestinian Authority (PA) after it was created by the Oslo Accords. Working under a sub-colonial structure, they were turned into agents of the occupying power, as seen in the divisive and dangerous security coordination between Israel and the PA. These fundamental issues that deepen our entrapment in Israel’s repressive structures cannot be ignored.

A movement is starting to take shape amid these long-standing divisions and violence. There has never been such an urge for a unified front with a clear revolutionary vision that galvanizes people behind a common goal: decolonizing Palestine. Much of the energy is dispersed, with many Palestinians and even their supporters now acting individually, writing an article here or there to spread awareness about a certain issue in Palestine, or producing a painting or a novel. Even Palestinian prisoners debate the effectiveness of individual or mass hunger strikes in reaching their goals of dismantling the Israeli prison complex. All, even as they act individually, are undoubtedly part of a cumulative struggle, but there is more power in the coordinated mass struggle, especially when fighting such a powerful establishment with strong backing all over the globe.

The current political landscape in Palestine maintains the Oslo Accords’ dysfunctional structure. It reduces Palestinians to those in Gaza and the West Bank, and also furthers the illusions of a Palestinian autonomous authority under apartheid. At most, it might ease the conditions of occupation. For Gaza, this would mean increasing the electricity supply from six to twelve hours daily or extending its fishing rights zone from

three to six nautical miles. No lessons seem to have been learnt among the Palestinian political elite, so it is up to us to learn, change, and move forward.

Speaking positively—even aside from the rise of right-wing politics, individualism, and racism—there are signs of hope. From the US to Britain and Ireland, and from Palestine to Cuba and Kashmir, there are growing progressive movements worldwide that vary in their campaigns—from decolonization to racial and climate justice, to gender and social equality. Even when the previous decade of upheavals in the Arab region divided people over what is revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, and burdened our world with more refugees, it is in these moments of instability that consciousness and possibilities can be fostered. There is a greater awareness about the role of imperialism and capitalism in the persisting racial and economic inequalities, further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for meaningful change for our collective survival in an increasingly interconnected world. There are also growing communities of influential intellectuals, filmmakers, and activist groups dispersed among Palestine, the Arab world, and the main centers of capitalism that could foster a movement of change, if we come together and revive or create a structure that represents what the PLO used to represent to the Palestinians in the 1970s as it joined forces with international movements fighting for global justice.

Young Palestinians from the Gaza Parkour team practice their parkour skills at a cemetery in Khan Younis City, southern Gaza Strip, on February 3, 2016. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Don’t Step on My Feet Again

Basman Aldirawi

Under the constant buzzing
Of drones,
The roar of F-16s over my head
While I play hide and seek
With peace,
Whispering, *Don’t be just a break*
In between assaults,

The electricity goes off.
Total darkness.
While I dance with hope,
Whispering, *Don’t step on my*
Feet again.

At the border crossing
Between the earth and sky
I still stand for hours.
My legs are shaking,
The sweat all over my body,
A voice inside my head, whispering
You’re a full human even if
You feel like half.

Palestinian farmers harvest cucumbers from their farm near the beach in Gaza City. May 27, 2020. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Lost Identity:
The Tale of Peasantry and Nature

Asmaa Abu Mezied

I started writing this chapter in order to explore how agrarian practices, historically, have been essential for Palestinians in forming an intimate relationship to the land, in what theorists refer to as "place attachment." Place Attachment theory explores the bond a person forms with a place—beyond a feeling of home—where an individual's identity is shaped by interaction with the land.[1] I also examine how Palestinians historically engaged in harmony with nature through environmentally friendly practices and how that relationship evolved over the past century in the Gaza Strip.[2] My research reveals a lack of scholarship related to Gaza on the role of and attitudes toward agriculture and institutional efforts to document and preserve Palestinian heritage for future generations.

Throughout this journey, I have questioned myself on whether I have the right to write about this issue. I questioned my privilege as a descendent of people living in my village for centuries, as someone who did not personally experience Al-Nakba or the loss of land because of that historic event. I am by no means speaking for Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip; I speak only for myself and what I have learned through scholarship, personal observation, memories, reflections, and discussions with several stakeholders. I also reflect on childhood memories, oral heritage, and what I was taught as someone living in what used to be a small village in the Gaza Strip.

Land, Folklore, and Agriculture

As a child growing up in a Bedouin community in the Gaza Strip, my grandmother would tell me "يا جدة حِجر تراب ولا حِجر ذهب" (Oh, my granddaughter, a lap covered in the soil is better that one covered with gold). I didn't understand why she would repeat those words, because Bedouin communities don't settle in one place and they "lack attachment to one place." With more reflection, I realized that my grandmother was talking about something beyond her Bedouin identity—something more encompassing: a Palestinian identity that is deeply rooted in the land.

The Palestinians' connection to the land is thousands of years old, as can be seen, for example, in their attention to olive and citrus trees. The Palestinian Canaanites used to grow olive trees and export olive oil to pharaonic families in Egypt, including the eighteenth pharaonic dynasty, 2000 BC.[3] Agriculture was an important expression of existence and connection to nature and the land. Just like indigenous peoples elsewhere, Palestinians transferred their agricultural knowledge and awareness through legends, songs, and proverbs, forming a heritage that was passed from one generation to another, creating an indelible and deeply rooted historical connection to the land and the landscape.

Stories, proverbs, and legends in Palestine convey wisdom, similar to how the "Three Sisters" story in the Iroquois culture illustrates companion planting—the practice of growing different plants together because it is mutually beneficial.[4] They speak to planting patterns that reflect an agricultural calendar and an understanding of climate-related issues. For example, the proverb "سرحنا في شباط على زارعة العنبات" (In February, we plant grapes) indicates a specific time of year when grape seedlings must be planted.[5] The proverb " سنة الزرزور أحُرث في البور وسنة القطا بيع الغطا " (When you see starling birds, it is the year to plant, but when you see Pterocles birds, no need to cover from the rain) links the prediction of a rainy year (or dry year) with the appearance of specific birds: starling birds imply heavy rain while Pterocles birds predict years with light rain.[6]

Folk songs also link agriculture and nature with specific historical events. Take, for example, the lyric “ يا زتون ما مروا عنك عراقية بارودهم في كتوفهم مجلية ” (Oh Olive trees, Iraqis just passed by and, on their shoulders, they hold their guns), which was sung during the 1948 war when Palestinian women saw the Iraqi army coming to defend Palestine.[7] Other works of folklore spoke of precautions people needed to consider when farming to ensure food security; for example, the proverb “ إذروا المساطيح من الريح” (Cover the fig-filled rooftops from the wind) informs farmers when and how to dry figs, a vital source of food.[8] My grandmother’s words echoed many Palestinian proverbs, showing how the land is an integral part of our lives and identity that is more precious than gold.

The folklore we are raised with revolves mainly around the land, and I found myself thinking that getting attached to a place is nothing new. Everyone forms a relationship with a place, particularly one we grow up with, where we develop memories, emotions, and familiarity. However, our heritage, particularly as it relates to agriculture, does not simply reflect a place but a narrative that is much deeper and more complex. Scholars of place attachment argue that farmers, in particular, establish a powerful bond with their farms that affects how “they view and treat their land.”[9] A reciprocal relationship develops between the land and the farmer, resulting in economic security and care. This relationship strengthens one’s ties with the land beyond its physical borders, where an emotional bond is created and deepened that influences one’s identity.[10] How did agriculture shape Palestinian connectedness to the land and local ecosystem? How did it shape Palestinian identity formation and its role in Palestine’s most significant historical events? This is what I am trying to explore.

Place attachment theory suggests that farmers form strong ties to the land because of the economic security and deepened spirituality that farming provides. However, in the case of Palestine, I argue that peasants experienced certain historical events and systematic colonial policies and practices that reshaped their peasant identity and attachment to the land. The different roles the Palestinian farmer played— social agent, political

mobilizer, and freedom fighter—became an integral part of the farmer's identity, which went beyond the traditional notion of place attachment. This expansion of peasant identity applied to everyone in village communities in historical Palestine, since most family members engaged in agricultural activities, whether as livelihood or social ritual. I shall focus specifically on the Gaza Strip and examine, in particular, how peasant identity was shaped and altered over the past century, and why.

Palestine's Fertile Land and Agricultural Practice

Despite its small size, Palestine possesses a rich environment with a diverse topography. Palestine contains mountains, seacoasts, and valleys—above and below sea level—with a range of soil varieties allowing for a rich diversity of species and agricultural patterns. Plants, birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, invertebrates, forests, and woodland all exist in Palestine, creating a rich environment for agriculture and a need for environmental protection. Palestine is located in the Fertile Crescent, where the earliest forms of agriculture were practiced, utilizing the region's rich fauna and flora and wild seed species.[11]

Historical records show that Palestine had a significant agricultural sector over centuries, producing diversified crops and goods such as olives, grapes, citrus, cotton, soap, sugarcane, and sesame. The majority of these crops were exported—for example, the cotton and sesame went to France, and the wheat to Italy.[12] There was a growing demand for citrus trees in the early twentieth century, particularly from Jaffa, while Gaza was very famous for exporting barley. These records counter the myth, intentionally spread by Palestine's detractors, that the country's flourishing agriculture owed to the early Jewish colonists/pioneers. Although agricultural practices adopted by the Palestinians were described as "primitive," official export data reveal a different story. British consuls' reports of rising demand for Palestinian barley, citrus, cotton, and olive oil indicate high-quality products and advanced agricultural knowledge. Palestinian expertise in

citrus grafting contributed to the skyrocketing of Jaffa's orange exports from 290,000 orange cases in 1897 to 1,608,570 cases in 1913.[13]

The village of Battir in the West Bank is another example of advanced agricultural technologies, which date to its Canaanite past and are characterized, in part, by agrarian valleys, drywall terraces, and agricultural watchtowers. The very nature of Battir's sustained commitment to agricultural practice was instrumental in shaping its cultural heritage, its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its resistance to Israeli land confiscation and to the erasure of Palestinian heritage.[14] Villages like Battir represent the backbone of agricultural development in Palestine. They maintain agrarian practices to support the village's livelihood and food security, preserve local seeds and other plants, and pass down agricultural techniques to future generations.

To live in a village is to form interconnected and deeply embedded social and economic relationships with others. When I was a child, everyone knew everybody in my village, and I remember how people stood by each other, especially during happy and sad events. However, my memories reflect very little of the collective life that my father describes in his childhood memories of the village. The peasant life is an interdependent one, never individualistic; people rely on each other to help with different tasks and agricultural practices. To have a large number of children and the support of the village was instrumental to the agrarian production that sustained peasant life. Sayigh observes that, owing to the pastoral production patterns in Palestinian villages, Palestine tends to be classified as a "subsistence economy"—self-dependent with only a few villages engaged in production for markets.[15]

The Gaza Landscape over Time

The Gaza Strip is part of what used to be known as Qada Gaza, which consisted of fifty-four villages and three cities (Gaza, Al-Majdal, and Khan

Younis) in 1910, with a total area of 1,111 square kilometers. Its population reached 137,180 by early 1945.[16] This coastal region has different types of soil; one of the most important is loess soil. Loess soil is located in the eastern area, which is fertile and most suitable for crops and trees.[17] Agriculture in Qada Gaza was mainly focused on planting barley in the southern zones.[18] Watermelon's production decreased during the 1940s, whereas fruit trees became increasingly important.[19] For example, the number of citrus trees in Qada Gaza increased from 23,695 dunum[20] in 1938 to 31,418 dunum in 1945, just before the Nakba. Although Qada Gaza is not as topographically diverse as northern Palestine with its mountains, inland valleys, and fertile plains, it still constituted a vital component of Palestinian agricultural land and economy.

One cannot deny the impact of village and peasant life on Qada Gaza. Sayigh describes how "village and clan solidarity formed a warm, strong, stable environment for the individual, a sense of rootedness and belonging" that continued over time.[21] Palestinian identity and its connection to agriculture and the environment were shaped by significant events over the past century: the 1936–39 Great Revolt, 1948 Nakba, and subsequent Israeli policies of colonization and occupation. I should note that in researching these periods, it was difficult to find Gaza-specific data. The data focuses largely if not exclusively on the West Bank. For example, the Palestine Museum of Natural History has done a fantastic job documenting and researching the impact of Israeli occupation policies on biodiversity and the environment in the West Bank, but Gaza is rarely covered. Even in the historical records concerning the Nakba, the principal focus is on villages, peasantry, and social life in the West Bank. Consequently, I refer to available studies on the West Bank as a larger contextual framework for the Gaza Strip, providing as much specific detail on Gaza as possible.

Early Attacks on Peasant Identity and the Role of the Peasantry in the 1936–39 Revolt

From the earliest days of interaction, Israel attempted to undermine and obscure Palestinians' historical claims to the land by portraying Palestine as a neglected land, "a desert" that only became inhabitable and flourishing through Zionist agricultural effort in the early 1900s.[22] Such claims intentionally omit the viability of Palestinian agriculture and the success of rural communities in achieving food-basket diversity and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, Israel used agricultural cultivation to create a sense of rootedness in the land for the early Zionists. By 1931, for example, about 19 percent of Jewish settlers were engaged in agriculture.[23] A century later, Israel still propagates the myth of the absence of Palestinian land cultivation to legitimize its confiscation of land in the West Bank.[24] My grandmother used to say, "You give to al-ard (the land), she will give back to you." She meant that one must carefully care for the land through hard work, investment, and good agricultural practice to produce better yields as a reward. However, my grandmother's words also spoke to an attachment to land that was deeply tied to protection and security. Protecting the land against invaders and natural catastrophes is an important part of caring for the land. The Palestinian farmers' devotion to the land and their actions to protect it were deeply embedded historically. Kayyali describes Palestinian farmers before 1948 as "more prone to action and revolt entailing self-sacrifice than other groups of society."[25] Palestinian peasants used various tactics, including soft resistance against the inequities of the capitalist system, protesting, raiding Israeli colonial settlements in the late nineteenth century, and the mobilization of the 1936–39 rebellion.[26] These tactics and events highlight the critical political and social role played by the Palestinian peasantry.

Peasants were significantly affected by the Zionist movement and were instrumental in fighting it. Zionist expansion, facilitated by British imperialism, to establish Israeli settlement early in the twentieth century

uprooted many Palestinian peasant sharecroppers who cultivated the lands that Jewish settlers purchased or otherwise obtained. In addition, Britain's exorbitant taxes and the avarice of Palestinian notables left "some 30 percent of all Palestinian villagers landless."[27] Jewish settlement in rural lands skyrocketed from 300,000 dunum to 1,250,000 dunum in 1930, leaving about 20,000 Palestinian peasants landless by 1931 and threatening Palestinian livelihood and land identity.

Peasants who lost their lands to Zionist settlement embarked on activism, which was remarkably well organized by educated youth in Palestinian villages during the nationalist movement in the 1930s.[28] It is important to note that Palestinian peasants were not a homogenous group, and class privilege was instrumental in shaping their connection to the land. For example, small peasants demonstrated great sacrifice for the national cause by selling their lands to arm the struggle. In contrast, wealthy notables and upper-class elites who owned the most extensive land tracts supported British policies and acted feebly in the face of Zionist settlement and expansion, in a manner that served their interests even at the expense of Palestinian villagers and farmers.[29] Furthermore, the rich played a role in suppressing any resistance by the peasantry that aimed at maintaining their autonomy and economic welfare.

Those notables and feudal overseers didn't "care" for the land in the way my grandmother meant. While enriching themselves, they abused the farmers and workers who devoted years of their lives caring for the land. In one example, the bourgeois Lebanese Sursock family, who were absentee landlords, sold their lands in Marj Ibn Amer to the Jewish National Fund, evicting 8,730 Palestinian peasants in the process.[30] Approximately half of the lands purchased by Zionist funds were sold by absentee landlords, with residing landlords selling an additional 25 percent, while individual peasants sold less than 10 percent of lands. The latter were systematically pushed to sell because of British policies and taxes that typically favored the Jewish population and wealthy Palestinians.[31]

The economic divisions between the Palestinian upper and lower classes were also reflected politically, particularly in nationalist discourse and activism. The upper-class Palestinians initially united with the oppressed classes—consisting of workers and peasants—to maintain their leadership position against the national threat of Zionism. Yet, this unity required notables to enact structural changes demanded by the oppressed classes that would jeopardize the notables' remaining power. That is why, whenever they had to choose between their individual class interest and a progressive economic and political agenda that would serve the greater good, the former took precedence, as exemplified in the Great Revolt.

During the revolt, national committees were organized to coordinate a general strike, and in May 1936, a conference was held involving all the rural national committees. These committees called for adopting a platform with pro-peasant agendas, such as abolishing the unfair agricultural taxation system and the immediate cessation of land sales, which were fueling the deterioration of the peasantry's conditions.[32] As a consequence of the strike, the British targeted the organizing cadre, not the upper-class national leadership.[33] The British were pleased with the relatively mild response of the revolution's national leadership. Even its decision to end the general strike was made to protect merchants' and citrus exporters' profits.[34] About 90 percent of the rebels were peasants, and for the whole three-year span of the Great Revolt, the countryside continued to play a significant role as political challenger of the status quo.[35] Peasants organized and funded the revolt and protected the rebels. Between 1937 and 1939, the local leadership was in charge of all activism while the national leadership was in exile, based in Damascus.[36] The former bore the brunt of the British iron fist, which included imprisonment, home demolitions, and execution. The revolution was a peasant revolution, and its symbol, the *kuffiya* (checkered headscarf), was mainstreamed across Palestine throughout those years.

The events of the Great Revolt need to be read thoughtfully and critically to understand fully its multilayered complexity. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine in detail Britain's oppressive policies to

suppress the insurgency, as well as the roles of Zionist militias and Arab governments, anthropologist Ted Swedenburg and others have argued that Palestinian "peasants possessed traditions of resistance"—a topic not substantially addressed by mainstream scholarship of the Great Revolt—that date to Ottoman times.[37]

The Nakba of People, Peasantry, and Environment

The role of the peasants in the national resistance continued to be robust. Historical records covering 1948 show that Palestinian farmers in Qada Gaza and other areas actively defended their land. For example, some mortgaged their farms to buy rifles to fight the Zionist militias.[38] Furthermore, along with the Arab armies, the villages played a vital resistance role even before the Nakba. In Burayr village in Qada Gaza, residents collectively dug a trench around the village that managed to block Israeli tanks from attacking Burayr over the next four months.[39] The villages created among themselves a support system of cooperation and solidarity to provide those in need with food, clothes, and fighters. Sawafir, Majdil, Jusayr,[40] and Ausdod villagers provided aid to Bayt Daras to fend off the Zionist militias. Furthermore, even during the 1948 war, Palestinians continued to practice agriculture; during an announced cease-fire, for example, Jusayr villagers attempted to harvest their crops but were massacred by Zionist forces in the fields.[41]

The 1948 Nakba resulted in the mass expulsion and ethnic cleansing of the population, which was located primarily in rural areas and for whom agriculture was their primary activity. As such, Palestinians lost access to an economic activity that was a defining factor in their livelihood and in their relationship to the land. In addition, the fighting resulted in what Qumsiyeh calls an "environmental Nakba"—the systematic destruction of the local fauna and flora and native trees such as oak, hawthorns, and olives (among others), which were replaced with fast-growing European crops like pine

trees.[42] Qada Gaza lost the majority of its villages (forty-five in total, in addition to the city of Al-Majdal),[43] its vital economic resources, and its agricultural base: out of 22,000 dunum of citrus farms that existed before the Nakba, only 4,000 dunum now remained; out of one million dunum of cereal plantations, only 17,000 dunum remained.[44]

The deliberate destruction of agriculture and land was also a factor in the displacement of agriculture after 1948. Israeli militias, namely Samson's Foxes, targeted crops, trees, agricultural land, and livestock through artillery shelling and the burning of crops. They followed the mythical tradition of the foxes that Samson of the Hebrew Bible set on fire, which in turn set fire to the fields of Philistia in Gaza.

The environmental Nakba was not a onetime event but a systematic, continuous destruction of agricultural production and, with it, Palestinian livelihood. Israel also used environmental preservation initiatives as excuses to seize land. In 2015, for example, Israel confiscated approximately 576,491 dunum in the West Bank by designating them natural reserves. Half of these lands lie within Israeli settlements and closed military areas, which contradicts claims of environmental preservation and speaks instead of land expropriation.[45] Hence, developments like European-like afforestation initiatives early in the twentieth century, the introduction of non-native plant species, and subsequent agricultural and ecological destruction by the Israeli occupation (be it through expulsion, illegal settlement expansion, blockade, or the wars on Gaza) directly target Palestinian history and historical claims to the land. The destruction of Palestinian ecology is an attempt to deny—if not remove—Palestine's historical existence.

Peasant Life and the Rituals of Attachment

Despite Israel's continuous attempts at erasure, the narrative of the land, villages, and geography endured, continuously passed from first-generation

refugees to their children and grandchildren, who memorize it by heart. Palestinian refugees would gather in their camps to tell the stories of their lives before the Nakba and their exodus as an act of collective remembrance. Sayigh writes, “There is no detail of village life, from crops to quarrels, that people cannot remember in microscopic detail.”[46] A friend of mine told me how her grandfather, who was forcibly displaced in the Gaza Strip, would take his sons every weekend to the land that he had bought in northern Gaza, post-Nakba, to grow crops. It didn’t matter whether his sons were doctors or engineers; no one was excused from participating in the ritual of farming. The purpose wasn’t to replace a past life; instead, it was to create a stronger attachment to, and keep alive, something that had been taken from them.

That ritual was not limited to people in the Gaza Strip, for Palestinians across historic Palestine embraced agriculture, figuratively and literally, after the Nakba. Swedenburg argues that agriculture has been a fundamental factor in shaping Palestinian identity as both a political expression and as a “custodian of nature.”[47] He describes the peasantry as a “national signifier” and a “crucial ideological weapon” for Palestinians in their struggle against settler-colonialism. “Land Day/Youm al-Ard,”[48] commemorates March 30, 1976, when Palestinian residents of Israel protested Israeli plans to confiscate thousands of dunums in the Galilee (Al Jaleel). Six Palestinian protesters were killed and hundreds wounded by Israeli forces. From that time, Palestinians everywhere annually commemorate these events. Land Day epitomizes the intimate connections among land, natural resource preservation, and nationalism in Palestine’s struggle against settler-colonialism.

Furthermore, the use of symbols of rural life increased dramatically after the Nakba, in posters depicting historical Palestine, poems, and songs, and in the revival of folklore. One reason for the increase was Israel’s censorship of any expression of Palestinian nationalism, which encouraged intellectuals to adopt subtle yet significant symbols of the peasantry to express Palestinian identity.[49] It wasn’t the agriculture per se that

Palestinians were trying to revive but, instead, their endangered identity. Their effort to keep it alive was "an act to challenge continual colonial effacement."[50] I encountered this sentiment in discussions with my uncle after I returned to Gaza from studying abroad. I told him that he should travel to see how nature flourishes elsewhere in the world. I was expressing how the natural beauty I encountered made one want to live there for the rest of their life. My uncle was not impressed and told me: "Seeing the water running from the water pumps"—here referring to his land in our village—"through the trenches to reach the trees is more magnificent. That is enough for me, rather than your United Kingdom or France."

After 1948, most of the population of Qada Gaza became refugees. They lost their land, property, and jobs as agricultural laborers on citrus and cereal farms. Palestinian refugees were crowded into what is now known as the "Gaza Strip," an area one-third the size of Qada Gaza and poor in natural and non-natural resources. Gaza's population tripled.[51] Consequently, the availability of arable land decreased dramatically, resulting in the per capita/arable land ratio of Gaza dropping lower than that of other high population density countries such as Egypt and Lebanon.[52] The population increase overtaxed the already war-torn land and limited its natural resources; yet both locals and refugees had no option but to use what was available. Thus, people turned to trade and agriculture, encouraged by Gaza notables and merchants.

By 1966, more than half of the Strip's land was agricultural: 170,255 cultivated dunum, of which 68,000 dunum were planted with citrus, represented 20 percent of Gaza's total land area. The boom in agriculture during the 1960s was attributed primarily to one resource: agricultural labor, as about 71 percent of the refugees were either from villages or Bedouin communities.[53] Yet this boom was not possible without the support of Palestinians working in the diaspora, who sent money transfers to their parents to start land reclamation, focusing on citrus.[54] My father, like many others who worked abroad, sent most of his salary to support my grandfather's citrus farm.

These funds were crucial for small farmers. However, the emphasis on land reclamation was not only a result of the terrible economic situation confronting refugees. People used the money sent by their children to buy land for a home as well as for agriculture, in order to recreate an experience resembling the past, albeit more temporary. When recounting fond memories of her grandmother, my friend Israa told me: “My grandmother, Mariam, was unimaginably connected to the land. She was a strong woman, a fighter. She used to be responsible for the farming of the lands in Eastern Sawafir and, after Al-Nakba, she maintained the same practices. She planted the land they bought in Deir Al-Balah with lemon, olive, pomegranate, and palm trees. As children, she would gather us all and tell us stories of her life in the village and teach us how plants are cared for.” My friend reflected how most of her cousins and aunts adopted a lifestyle that resembled her grandmother.

The land, memories, and location of each tree that people lost in their villages were ever present in the refugee mind and memory. As if by still practicing agriculture, they told themselves that they were still here— that, although they lost the land, it wasn’t lost completely. I read an article about the centenarian Muhammad Rajab al-Tom, who was born in 1889, in which he mentioned how he saved money to buy agricultural lands and plant them with citrus trees in the Gaza Strip. In 1948 his family lost their lands, about 200 dunum, in the Al-Muharraqa village located in the Qada Gaza.[55] Agriculture was a ritual to connect with what was lost.

The embrace of the rural imaginary, the growing attachment to agricultural symbolism, and the stronger evocation of both refugee and non-refugee memories of peasant and village life were not reflected in agricultural realities on the ground. My friend Areij recalled how, although her identity as a peasant is derived from her grandparents and stories of their life before the Nakba, growing up in a refugee camp with a strong focus on education restricted her attachment to agriculture to the memories told by her grandmother. Over the past century, Israel’s occupation policies targeting the Palestinian agricultural sector continue to create a widening

chasm between agricultural realities and the romanticized version valorized in our heritage. As someone who has worked in the agriculture sector for years, I see this gap. Palestinians, particularly those in the diaspora, love to cite Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Returning to Jaffa," which sings praises to Jaffa oranges. They wear necklaces with the Palestine map and olive trees and celebrate rural life as an expression of their nationalism. I understand that these gestures serve as a reminder of and an attachment to a Palestine and a concept of home that have been lost. Yet, they also reflect a painful detachment from reality. All those things of Palestinian imagination are gone, and the occupation continues to destroy those that remain. Agriculture has become more marginalized than ever and will continue to be so; our rural customs and past forms of economic solidarity are disappearing in their daily confrontation with the occupation. Those sentiments mean nothing to the struggling farmer in Gaza who is alive but not living. Said one friend, "Growing up in a farming family depending on agriculture for livelihood, the relationship was not always romantic. I hated working, plowing, and fertilizing the land, plowing and harvesting olives. Those were onerous tasks. The Palestinian romanticized collective connection to the importance of the land and its symbols was not always present in our talks about the land, but was apart."

Israel's ongoing assault on agriculture is directed not only toward erasing the past but also destroying the present and consequently the future, thereby eliminating any Palestinian claim to the land, entrapping them in a vicious cycle of poverty with the majority unable to leave, and depriving them of agency and the ability to resist. There is a famous saying by the Islamic scholar Muhammad al-Sha'rawi that people, including Palestinians, always recite: "من لا يأكل من فأسه، لا ينطق من رأسه": " (He who doesn't eat from his axe doesn't speak from his head). This saying speaks to the central importance of agriculture (and local production) as a need and source of support, critical to the independence of the individual and the family. This is why Israel continues to attack agriculture and the promise of independence it implies, and why Palestinians continue to hold onto

agriculture— its vision and its practice—despite their gradually diminishing capacities.

The "Golden Times" of Gaza Blurred

When you ask people in the Gaza Strip about agriculture, they always mention the period of the 1960s with the citrus plantations and exports. Regardless of their background, they describe this period as the "golden times" of Gaza, similar to the "lost paradise" that first-generation refugees depicted. However, I cannot say that those times truly reflected a deeper connection to the land. The prominence of agriculture in the 1960s brought limited benefits to refugees and smallholder farmers. Export returns from citrus were not converted into development projects or investment in agricultural infrastructure, and they did not really reach those engaged in agriculture. Exports increased class divisions and enriched traders and landowners. Historical records contradict arguments that agricultural laborers benefited. Rather, increases in prices of basic food staples, traders' manipulation of export sales figures, the promotion of consumerism, and the dumping of luxury items into Gaza's markets demonstrate that these times weren't golden. The focus on monoculture and complementary cash crops, particularly with regard to citrus, was an extension of colonial agriculture serving Western markets rather than providing food security for local inhabitants.

The agriculture-based identity evolved differently among various groups of people in the Gaza Strip. For example, most refugees were poverty-stricken, unable to purchase lands and resume their pre-Nakba livelihood. Thus, refugees who had been landowners joined the ranks of the proletariat. Although they stayed connected to the land through agricultural labor, agriculture became merely a waged job deprived of its social and political relationships, blurring the identity of the peasant. Refugees who could afford to purchase lands left the camps and established homes for their families. Those who purchased land both to establish homes and for

cultivation found their small lots were unfeasible as a primary source of income.

Additionally, although landowners who were also farmers maintained strong ties to the land, their children were less likely to pursue agriculture-related careers or care for the land and value it. Buheiry refers to a statement by Ruppin in 1908 describing the desperation of farmers in the "Jewish colonies" as their agricultural efforts failed and they faced a bleak future.[56] He recounts how they had to learn from the Palestinians the best ways of cultivating the land. According to Ruppin, the younger Jewish generation wished to abandon agriculture for more rewarding and lucrative work. A hundred years later, we find ourselves in a similar position. We are witnessing a reversal of our past, as the current generation of Palestinian farmers are wary of agriculture and discourage their children from becoming farmers. The loss of economic security from agriculture has distorted the relationship between the farmer and their land, breaking a vital emotional bond. The consequent alienation of the farmer's children from agriculture has limited their understanding of the historical role farmers played in the national struggle, and the critical connection between agriculture and Palestinian identity formation.

These behaviors cannot be depoliticized or viewed in isolation from socioeconomic conditions and Israel's exploitative practices. The continuous cataclysms Palestinians faced and continue to face have resulted in a chronic and entrenched state of poverty and deliberate de-development. Given these circumstances, the average Palestinian farmer is left with no choice when it comes to survival or keeping his land. To survive, the farmer must find other options. I know of a man in the city near my village who had to sell his land to survive and get his son married; however, he put a condition on the buyer: they had to give him the trees he nurtured for decades.

My village used to be known as an agricultural oasis, which people living in Gaza City would visit if they wanted to disconnect from city life and see nature. However, agriculture became too expensive to be profitable

and, with the death of older generations and the subsequent division of inheritance that fragmented agricultural land, the younger generation started to sell the land. They sold it to get married, build a house, and create economic activity in trade, and some used it to travel. The new landowners are usually white-collar employees who had never farmed before and want to use it either as a retreat or to establish a business in the local tourism sector by building a resort. The resort is land with a swimming pool and some greenery. My once agricultural village has become what the municipality likes to call "a touristic village." I find the term misleading because this celebrated tourism has been very harmful to the water aquifers and agricultural lands in the village. Filling and refilling the swimming pools, among other factors, has consumed fresh water and resulted in seawater intrusion in the areas closer to the sea. Increased water salinity has harmed the trees that have been cultivated for more than half a century, such as citrus and palm.

A Befallen Environment: Agriculture and the Israeli Occupation

In the Gaza Strip, labor force participation in agriculture has dropped from 32 percent in 1970 to 4.7 percent in 2019.[57] To understand why people are leaving agriculture, even those who experienced its "golden times," I need to review Israeli policies.

Israel's policies toward the Palestinian agricultural sector and environment followed what Swedenburg calls a "Preservation-Dissolution"[58] policy, which aimed to destroy agriculture for political purposes.[59] The policy is multilayered. One approach was to render the agriculture sector economically unviable, making local producers unable to compete with Israeli production and forcing them to abandon the industry or work as cheap labor in Israeli settlements. A short documentary entitled "Paralyzed," produced by Oxfam and released in 2020, provides insight into the different issues facing farmers in the Gaza Strip, including limited

land area and agriculture's diminished economic status.[60] By allowing Palestinians to work in agriculture inside Israel (the "Green Line") where they could earn higher wages than they could locally, agrarian labor was drained from the Gaza Strip, beginning in the 1970s.

Israel also handicaps Palestinian agriculture by dumping Israeli products into Palestinian markets. For example, George Kurzom's examination of cut-flower farming in Gaza explains how economic incentives provided by Israel encourage Palestinian agriculture that avoids competition with Israeli agricultural products.[61] Steering Palestinian farmers away from basic staples and toward luxury products leaves the Palestinian market vulnerable to ruthless dumping and deepens Palestinian economic dependency on Israel. This not only reduces the availability and affordability of locally produced food in Palestinian markets but, given Israel's total control over the terms of trade, it also compromises the competitiveness of locally produced luxury exports (encouraged by Israel) such as cut flowers, which results in massive losses for Palestinian producers. This "colonial agriculture" emphasizes crop production solely for European and American markets, which jeopardizes local food security and sovereignty.

For example, in the 1990s the Gaza Strip was home to Red Gold, the production of strawberries and cut flowers, a stark example of colonial agriculture. Strawberry cultivation ranks among the top crops demanding water, further draining Gaza's already depleted aquifer.[62] This cash crop, deemed lucrative for its export potential, not only harms Gaza's natural resources, future food security, and livelihood but also Gaza's landscape. It reflects a broken social contract between the population, especially its farming communities, and the land they once celebrated.

Strawberries, furthermore, can only be exported through Israeli companies that sell them as Israeli products. The expensive inputs for the production of strawberries, such as seedlings and pesticides, must also be purchased from Israel. Israel restricts the use of certain herbicides and fertilizers essential for high-quality strawberries, only allowing fertilizers with a reduced shelf life and lower yield. Further, as the Israeli human

rights organization Gisha has shown, Israel has denied permits for the trade of Gaza's fresh fruits and vegetables to the West Bank, sometimes without clear justification. Taken altogether, these policies cause enormous losses for Gaza's farmers.[63]

Similarly, Palestinian farmers in the Gaza Strip are not able to introduce new irrigation systems, fertilizers, chemicals, and high-quality, climate-resilient seeds for mass production. Mass production requires a large tract of land, which is a near impossibility given Israel's buffer zone policy. For example, a buffer zone has been imposed along the eastern perimeter of the Gaza Strip, which contains Gaza's most fertile agricultural land. Consequently, half of the Strip's cultivated land is largely inaccessible.[64] Those farmers who choose to work within the buffer zone are subjected to psychological intimidation, crop destruction, and frequent shootings. Gisha reported that between 2010 and 2017, there were 1,300 incidents of live fire by Israeli security forces.[65] For security reasons, trees are rarely allowed to be planted in the buffer zone.

I remember meeting a farmer known as Al Za'eem ("the leader" or "chief"), who had one of the most beautiful farms I have ever seen in Gaza, located in the eastern part of the Strip. He told me how during the 2014 war on Gaza, he was so worried about his farm he prayed to God that if he must lose something, let it be his home and not his farm. He recalled how he slept and stayed on the farm during the war, checking every tree. Bullet holes damaged the front of his house, but he was grateful that his land and family survived. Years later, the water salinity of his soil resulted in the loss of his farm, and he suffered a heart attack. Al Za'eem was one of the farmers who never despaired and always kept planting despite the losses he incurred. However, there is a point beyond which we cannot endure; nor should we be told to be resilient.

The uprooting of trees is another destructive Israeli policy. Every time Palestinians in the Gaza Strip cultivate trees in the eastern perimeter, they get destroyed in the next invasion. One respondent shared: "I live in a village in the eastern areas of Gaza, and we got our share of the Israeli

violations. One day, the Israelis bulldozed olive trees from the seventies and eighties. I had never seen my grandfather as sad as that day when he sat at the remnants of the olive trees, and their roots." According to the Palestine Trade Center (PalTrade), more than one million trees have been uprooted since 2000, and between 2000 and 2005, more than 13,000 dunum were bulldozed.[66] Recovering from this loss is difficult because of the chronic cycles of destruction and loss that eat the smallholders' capital.

The policy of uprooting trees is essential to understand in its historical context. Cultivation is used as a tool of warfare to claim possession of the land. However, Braverman argues that while Israel's cultivation of pine trees is meant to impose state sovereignty, the Palestinians' cultivation of olive and fruit trees "signif[ies] a local [Palestinian] and agrarian presence."[67] For the Palestinian, it is not only about establishing a local presence; rather, the planting of trees represents several interdependent factors relevant to agriculture. They include economic livelihood and food security, political use of agriculture centered on concepts of resistance, survival, *sumud* (steadfastness), maintaining a cultural heritage that keeps the rural imaginary alive against the narrative of the settlers who claim the olive as a symbol, and the physical possession of the land.

When I was a child, as I walked from my school in Al Maghazi refugee camp to our village, I would raise my head high to see hundreds and thousands of migratory birds flying in the sky during spring and autumn. Though unable to name them, I would continue to stare for hours, thinking how they were free. While writing this chapter, I learned how Wadi Gaza was necessary for these migratory birds. Its wetland and natural landscape, with its diverse vegetation and plants, offered food, refuge, and protection.[68] The Wadi's fertile soil, which encouraged agriculture and related economic activities, made it fundamental to the community's well-being. However, Israel's establishment of retaining dams and its abstraction of water from the upper reaches of the Wadi in the 1970s harmed the Wadi.[69] The existence and sustainability of local flora and fauna habitats

were threatened because of a substantial decrease in the quantity and annual duration of water flowing downstream.

After the 1970s and the subsequent drying up of the Wadi, adjacent villages and refugee camps began discharging untreated sewage into the Wadi's riverbed, among other ecologically harmful practices.[70] Today, the historical image of the Wadi, representing its glory days of overflowing water and eco-touristic space, is an abstract concept. My recent memories of the Wadi are of me counting to fifteen while holding my breath to stop the smell of sewage from attacking my senses. And that magnificent sight of the bird migration has dwindled to just a glimpse of a few birds.

The hoopoes I used to see on the olive trees, the red poppy anemone flower that made the land a magnificent red carpet, the sweet mulberry tree in front of my grandparent's house that fed everyone in the neighborhood, the old almond tree that Israel hit during the aggression in 2008–9 were all part of my childhood memories of the land. Things that we took for granted that are no longer part of our existence. My journey with agriculture has made me more aware of nature and, with it, the loss of our indigenous trees and plants.[71]

A Just Future: Possibility or Mirage

It is difficult to visualize the future of agriculture without exploring the demographic explosion in the Gaza Strip. Recent statistics show that over just the thirteen years between 2007 and 2020, the Gaza population grew by 59 percent, reaching over 2.2 million people, double the growth rate in the West Bank.[72] The Gaza Strip is only 6 percent the size of the West Bank, which makes Gaza's population density extremely high, at 6,175 people per square kilometer, on land that is increasingly devoid of natural resources. Projecting similar growth trends into the future paints a grim picture for agriculture and food security in the absence of the economic and social change that would be initiated by lifting the blockade. The increasing

urbanization of the Strip to accommodate Gaza's rapidly expanding population will happen at the expense of already shrinking agricultural spaces, future food security, and the well-being of future generations.

As I have hopefully made clear, peasant life is no longer an option for Palestinians. It would be inaccurate to say that an absolute choice was ever really available to the Palestinian people, as farmers were slowly but consistently dispossessed of resources and opportunities, with future generations disinclined from engaging in agriculture. Yet, calls by Palestinian environmentalists to utilize agriculture as a form of nonviolent resistance against occupation and colonization stem from agriculture's historical role in connecting people to their land. Farming practices that build on indigenous knowledge and local food needs are an act of popular resistance to reclaim people's sovereignty over the food and the land; they are an "act of national resistance towards Palestinian economic resilience."[73] To return to the land is to revive that connection and challenge the exploitive practices that continue to harm our remaining biodiversity and threaten our cultural heritage.

As I was contemplating the future a friend asked me: "How would Gaza's future concerning agriculture look if Gaza were a normal place without occupation? Wouldn't agriculture be lost anyway in the face of industrialization?" My answer to her was, "I am not sure. Industrialization will likely take precedence over agriculture. Will agriculture be lost at the same pace as it did under occupation? I do not think so, nor do I think that the scale of loss and the poverty and lack of agency that resulted would be as great. We will never know, for that option to choose was taken away from us." The occupation took away the fundamental right of self-determination even for agriculture, to such an extent that I cannot imagine Gaza in the absence of Israeli occupation. No matter how hard I try to imagine that, I cannot; it is impossible. The realities of living under occupation are deeply engraved onto every little detail of our lives; no matter how many layers of occupation you peel away, more exist.

The assault on agriculture and the way of life that once was based on it will continue in the future as Israel attempts to reclaim our peasant heritage by proving its connection to the land and denying ours. Yet, when I saw that a Palestinian farmer, Tayseer Abu Dan, grew an organic rooftop garden in Khan Younis City, I was hopeful. Though his purpose is to secure his income, I think his garden also speaks to a certain possibility for Gaza.

Will agriculture continue to have a role in the economy and as a way of life in Gaza? In fifty years, that is very unlikely. I asked people to reflect on our agricultural past and what should we save and keep alive. Almost all those who responded agreed on the need to preserve our peasant heritage, folklore, narrative, and collective memories in a manner that is always accessible to future generations. We must continue to practice agriculture in whatever ways we can—grow rooftop gardens, plant olive trees that signify Palestinian steadfastness, develop awareness programs, document agricultural heritage, and celebrate agrarian festivals.

However, regenerating interest in a dying agricultural sector is not a long-term solution. There is no just future without systematically addressing the occupation and its exploitive policies. We must insist on a complete end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip: freedom of movement for people and goods, control over natural resources, and the depoliticization of development.

In Bethlehem, the Palestine Museum of Natural History is dedicated to learning about Palestine's biodiversity and environment. I read on its website about the educational trips it provides for children to explore nature and Palestine's natural environment. I wish I were a kid, and I wish I weren't in Gaza, so that I could learn about these things. I thought of my nephews and the many children in Gaza, our future generation, who will never know the stories behind the flora and fauna.

Despite its diminished role, agriculture is not just a source of income; it is an identity, a social cohesion ritual, and a political statement for Palestinians. Thus, I cannot imagine a future without an understanding of the linkages between indigenous knowledge and practice, history, and

heritage, and how agriculture shapes our identity and our role in protecting the land. Only then can we have a foundation for economic growth based in part on processing food from locally produced inputs instead of a deepening dependency on imports.

I wrote this chapter during the springtime, and it left me dreaming of establishing a nature museum, a tiny one, on my grandfather's land. Although this silly dream will not save agriculture, it could be a small attempt to engrave its past role onto our future consciousness. An Egyptian proverb says "ضيه تاه" (Those who lose their past, are lost). My dream of the museum is to reclaim our past so that we will never be lost and always know where we belong.

Epilogue: The May 2021 Aggression

I wanted to end with a dream and a bit of hope, but I was reminded again that the occupation constantly attempts, and many times succeeds, to cripple our dreams. The May 2021 aggression against Gaza took place during my last stage of writing, one of several brutal aggressions over the past fifteen years. Among the people killed, residential buildings destroyed, and road infrastructure and electrical lines targeted, the agriculture sector was severely damaged. Hundreds of dunum of open fields, greenhouses planted with vegetables, and trees were partially or completely destroyed. Any element making up the basic infrastructure of agricultural activity—agricultural ponds, wells, agriculture-related solar energy projects, irrigation networks, service roads—sustained damage. I believe this aggression did not kill our livelihood as much as it killed our future and our hope.

My cousin Ahmed, who is thirty years old and became a farmer at a young age after his father died, was among the farmers affected. Together with his partner, he has struggled for years to cultivate his land despite the ongoing challenges. He told me: "This season was supposed to compensate for all our losses from the previous seasons incurred by border closures. We were happily awaiting the season, thinking of all the debts we accumulated

to agricultural input suppliers for the seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. During the assault and for twelve days we were unable to reach our lands or irrigate them, and we lost thousands of dollars and seedlings of cauliflower and corn. Whenever we try to move forward one step, we are always pushed backwards a hundred steps." My cousin is like thousands of farmers across the Gaza Strip who now more than ever feel they are stuck in quicksand. The more they try to free themselves, the deeper they sink.

The deep connection between agricultural identity and land is highly dependent on nurturing this relationship. To have a "place attachment," Palestinian farmers need to first experience the economic benefits of the land—then their emotional attachment can grow stronger. However, in the context of Gaza and the aggression against it, farmers' attachment to their land needs to be viewed differently. My cousin and many other farmers would argue that their consistent failure to secure their livelihoods forces them to view their relationship with the land as "transactional," particularly as farmers now live below the poverty line. To sell one's land instead of cultivating it means a farmer can pay his accumulated debts, which is tantamount to salvation when all other options have been taken away. In this way the occupation managed to transform the farmer's connection to the land from one that represented rootedness and home into a purely economic and disposable interest. Tragically, this may continue to be the case until no farmer is left.

Regenerating interest in a dying agricultural sector, as many international donors have attempted, is not a solution. The only solution lies in ending the blockade and the occupation and allowing Palestinians their rights—to live freely, empowered to care for their children and their land.

A young Palestinian holding a flag during a demonstration against the blockade of the Gaza Strip. April 1, 2013. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Why Are You Still Here?

Basman Aldirawi

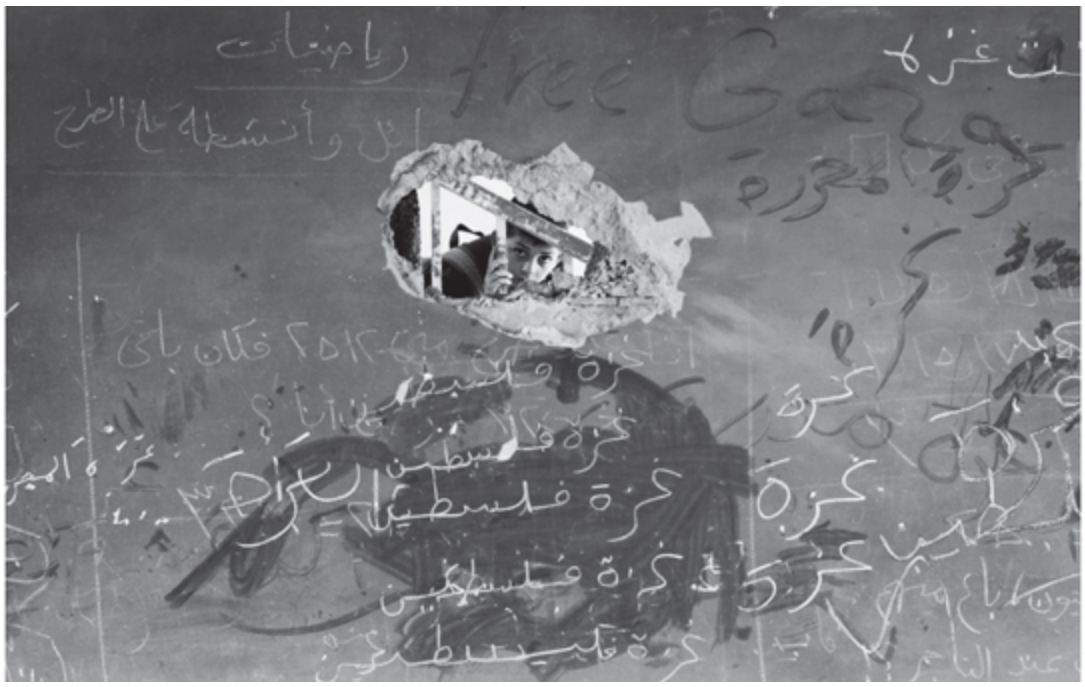
Despite tearing up over
Killing my olive tree,
I still hold the tears
To water another tree.

Despite their massive “veto”
Slapping my face,
The echo expands loudly
Into my space, shakes my
Core and squeezes my heart,
I still stand.

Despite their F-16s
Despite their machine guns
Despite their apartheid wall
Despite their checkpoints

I keep asking myself,
Why are you still here?
Sometimes I am lost in answering
Until I see my grandfather
Take a nap under his olive tree

Before the colonizer came
And ended his life.



A Palestinian student is seen through a damaged wall in a classroom at a public school targeted during the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2012. November 27, 2012. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Ethical Implications of Experimental Design on Affected Communities in the Gaza Strip

Salem Al Qudwa

Annihilation in Gaza has become so frequent that houses are built, destroyed, and reconstructed at the same time. For people living in surroundings as conflictual as those in Gaza, the great contrast between home as an ideal experience and a lived one affects how they define home. The dramatic social changes in Gaza justify the need to investigate the changing image of the home and ideal family. Moreover, Gaza's ongoing emergency and its accompanying dilemmas—the difficulty of importing construction materials, the urgent need for temporary shelters for the newly displaced, and the overall scarcity of drinking water, electricity, and economic options—have encouraged experimental structures to emerge.

Following the war on Gaza in the summer of 2014, acutely vulnerable families had to accept transitional wooden houses built for them by international organizations as a temporary measure until cement became available to build permanent houses. This resulted in substantial demographic and social changes, especially for low-income families. Some family members were compelled to move away from their extended family, which broke up strong family ties and removed protection provided by family members. This has had an unabated negative impact on Palestinian society, particularly the right to adequate housing.

In this chapter, I examine experimental architectural technologies and transitional designs. My three key questions are: What is the social role of architects and international aid organizations in addressing Gaza's housing challenges and struggles? What are the ethical implications of experimental

architectural technology and design on behalf of these communities? And what is the appropriate housing design for marginalized communities that will respect their cultural understandings and engage them over time? I draw on my architectural background, linking emergency and architectural site work to fieldwork research. To identify the fundamental reconstruction constraints, I feature a design-based case study of the Rehabilitation of Damaged Houses Project.

I argue that examining Gaza's current sociocultural context through the lens of the "architecture of the everyday" not only restores personal agency but also reveals future creative possibilities for built environments where few possibilities seem to exist. I seek to create a sustainable form of self-build architecture for families. This also challenges the well-intentioned but ultimately demeaning "cash for work" approach that informs the work of many international aid organizations in Gaza.[1]

In sum, I seek to contribute to the reconstruction process in Gaza, in which I see myself as a facilitator who challenges the siege and especially can make a qualitative change on the ground that will lay the foundation for future efforts by individuals themselves. I seek to empower Gazans, making them self-sufficient and able to use existing resources without having to relying on Israel or other external sources for building materials. Although my focus is on Gaza, the findings will benefit reconstruction efforts in other conflict zones in the Middle East where human displacement is a defining problem and post-conflict reconstruction of the built environment is an urgent need.

Some Key Facts about Gaza and Implications for Architecture

The Gaza Strip is 365 square kilometers, roughly the size of Las Vegas or a quarter the size of London. As home to over two million Palestinians, it is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Some dub Gaza "the world's largest open-air prison."[2] Around 70 percent of the population consists of refugees, who in 1948, fled or were expelled from their original

homes in what is now the State of Israel. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, family clans played a major role as powerful landowners and societal actors.[3] While land ownership is no longer a marker of social prestige in Palestinian society, the extended family remains the most important social unit. Older parents and grandparents are expected to rely on the financial and emotional support of their children and grandchildren.[4]

In local Arabic, *"Enta men dar/beit meen?"* (Which family/home are you from?) is the first question someone asks when you meet them. The Arabic words *dar* and *beit* both mean "house." People are identified in everyday interactions by their family name and, in a more informal way, by their resemblance to other family members. In the Palestinian psyche, the home is synonymous with family life.[5] Home, as a physical place of family practices, is important in Arab culture, and for uprooted people such as the Palestinians, the extended family serves as a vital institution critical to the survival of their culture.[6]

The high population density in the Gaza Strip (5,204 people per square kilometer) results in serious overcrowding, which translates into limited space available for new construction.[7] Consequently, young married couples typically live with the groom's family and other relatives and can hardly enjoy their privacy.[8] Equally, young people are forced to study in their grandparents' homes, on roofs, and in the kitchens of their houses, which studies show lowers academic achievement.[9] As a result of Israel's 2014 military offensive, more than one hundred thousand homes were damaged or destroyed. Since 2007, reconstruction in Gaza has been severely hampered by the Israeli blockade—which has virtually eliminated all the normal trade upon which Gaza's small economy depends. The blockade has also severely restricted the movement of people and goods and diminished financial resources.[10] This restricts access to desperately needed construction materials. As Israeli attacks on Gaza continue, the blockade has been tightened, causing even greater hardship to civilians. Furthermore, existing houses have been repeatedly bombed and destroyed.

Indeed, the bombing in May 2021—amid the COVID-19 pandemic—destroyed basic infrastructure and displaced some seventy-four thousand Gaza residents. Nearly seventeen thousand housing and commercial units were totally destroyed or partially damaged in the eleven-day campaign.

Consequently, most dwellings are not fully constructed and nearly all buildings fall short of Palestinian building code requirements, with gross violations of basic health and safety standards. Families often undertake the construction work themselves, through self-financing and with some local technical assistance, in order to address their urgent and basic needs. As land and resources are limited, the residential buildings are reduced to the bare essentials, and Gazans often have to add rooms incrementally because of their financial constraints.[11]

In response to factors such as land scarcity and a limited skilled workforce, architectural plans and work practices employ simple materials and unsophisticated construction techniques, with little capacity for innovation. Houses comprise essential elements—floors, walls, and roofs—but are not efficient in terms of providing for shelter, thermal comfort, and the family's basic human needs. Households often work with semi-skilled builders from their immediate neighborhood, using available materials (mainly concrete masonry blocks).

An example of a construction site in the Gaza Strip. Left: Working without a hard hat or lifeline, a semi-skilled bricklayer sets another row of cement blocks. Right: A worker makes cinder blocks for use in construction. Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2010.

The resulting buildings are concrete blocks that are far below basic building standards and fail to provide a sense of place and belonging. These self-built, multi-story detached houses have different floor plans responding to the needs of the extended family at a given moment in time. However, they cannot respond to climatic conditions, as they are extremely hot during the summer and damp and cold in the winter, and they also waste water, electricity, and natural resources.

Furthermore, residential projects constructed by donors such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) have largely identical plans for all floors. They often fail to meet the needs of displaced Palestinian families and may produce other negative social consequences such as overcrowding, improper ventilation, and inadequate natural lighting. Donor housing projects include "cooperative housing and subsidized mass housing clusters, and, in a few cases, neighborhood units" that do not create the sense of home and place that Gaza's displaced residents seek, and is often alien to the way they want to live.[12] As there has been limited research on the relationship between socio-spatial practices and architectural design in the Gaza Strip, I address that deficiency here.[13]

I focus on the concrete detached houses that have been self-built by low-income extended families in marginalized communities. I argue that Palestinians can build upon this practice by enhancing its utility and beauty. This will empower them to address their basic, functional needs on their own terms and, in the process, make them less dependent on external forces such as Israel and the international donor community.

Such self-building strategies[14] point to the increasing relevance of the "architecture of the everyday" that espouses such principles as simplicity, use of common available materials, and being both "ordinary"[15] and

“transformative.”[16] According to Berke and Harris, the intention is “to avoid cycles of materialistic consumerism and transient fashion that have reduced architecture to a series of stylistic fads.”[17]

I investigate the architecture of the everyday as a resource for alternative solutions to the housing crisis not only in Gaza but other areas of conflict and displacement.[18] While an end to the Israeli blockade is essential and the role of foreign assistance remains vital, the solution to Gaza’s housing crisis resides, at least in part, internally, in a different approach that strengthens local building values by engaging in practices that are culturally acceptable, protect the extended family fabric, and provide visual privacy while maintaining simplicity, flexibility, and aesthetics in housing design and construction.

Building(s) in a Crisis and Healing Wounds

The large windows of the Abercrombie Building, adjacent to the John Henry Brookes Building, won the Royal Institute of British Architects architectural award for excellent "sustainable" design in 2014. One unanticipated effect of the large window design has been its impact on birds.

In the summer of 2015, while I was pursuing my PhD at Oxford, there was a twenty-minute power outage in the Abercrombie Building, where the School of Architecture is located. My office was opposite the design studios, so I had a look around. Everyone was getting bored, as the computers had lost electricity and internet/Wi-Fi connection. Students were not talking to each other, but instead were busy with their mobiles, biting their nails as they waited for electricity to return. There was no water in the

bathroom because the outage had deactivated the faucets' sensors. This was my first experience of an outage in Oxford, and it was also the first time I saw how people responded in a place that is rarely disrupted in this way.

During the same semester, while sitting in my office, I heard the occasional thump as a bird crashed into the office windows. One poor bird flew at a large window that reflected the surrounding trees and sky. It was easy to see the trace of the bird after it hit the window. On impact, the dust moved from the bird's feathers to the glass surface to record all the details of the feathers and the flight. These were the large windows of the Abercrombie Building, adjacent to the John Henry Brookes Building, which won the Royal Institute of British Architects architectural award for excellent "sustainable" design in 2014. Green buildings promote sustainability and are designed with the explicit goal of fostering wildlife by attracting birds. Yet, the designer of the building may not have anticipated what these large windows might do to birds in flight.

On the other, more extreme end of "sustainability," "resilience," and "biodiversity" lie buildings such as those in Gaza (where I live) that were never built according to the criteria of sustainability and biodiversity; yet birds are still attracted to Gaza's war-ravaged buildings. By this I mean the following: I remember how a couple of birds came to build their nest in a hole in the wall of the building where I lived with my family. This hole and others had been caused by shrapnel from an Israeli F-16 missile.

I also remember—and can never forget—the innocent Palestinian children who were injured by shrapnel that scarred their beautiful faces. Whereas sustainable buildings can kill natural life, as they did the birds near my office building, in Gaza, architecture—partially or even wholly destroyed—can provide a habitat for birds to make a home. While concrete slabs and columns can destroy human bodies, and rubble and shrapnel can injure and maim people, birds will build their nests in what is left of the walls of destroyed homes. This simple, transformative act has provided Palestinians with a totally unexpected source of empowerment and creativity, where function and even beauty can be found in destruction, in the ordinary and unexpected.

I next provide context by examining the background of the social, economic, and political situation in the Gaza Strip and the challenges faced by the Palestinians. This overview will show how multiple issues affect the way Gazans build.

Obstacles to Reconstruction: Conflict and the Scarcity of Materials

Despite extensive efforts of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing and many international NGOs to rebuild homes damaged or destroyed by conflict, housing needs remain largely unmet. Approximately 79 percent of current housing needs are due to natural population growth and the need to rehouse refugees who currently live in camps. The situation is especially hard to address as ongoing Israeli military operations continue to destroy civilian houses. And tens of thousands live in severely damaged homes.[19]

The scarcity of land limits housing projects to high-density, multistory residential buildings that often impinge on agricultural land. This exacerbates poverty, as there is less viable land for subsistence farming and livestock.[20] The housing crisis creates social problems for affected families and is reflected in other conflict-related issues.

For example, during the four major military attacks in the previous decade, many people fled from the exposed border areas to Gaza City, which itself lost thousands of housing units. Land prices and housing needs escalated, while resources were severely limited. Furthermore, the ongoing Israeli (and Egyptian) blockade includes the almost complete closure of all crossings that link the Gaza Strip to the West Bank, Israel, and beyond. Critically, this prevents the movement of people and the entry of goods and materials, with the exception of basic humanitarian necessities. Construction materials (e.g., cement, gravel, and steel bars) and many spare parts for vehicles and computers are essential items, but Israel bans them as “dual use” items, arguing that they can be used for such military purposes as building tunnels or intelligence gathering. The limited construction

materials that are available in the local market make the cost of reconstruction extremely high.

In addition, international organizations' architectural projects typically demonstrate a limited understanding of the spatial formation of the urban fabric and do not consider the skills and experience of local construction workers. They don't consider the importance most families place on having concrete foundations and columns so that their homes reinforce their strong belief in "permanence as resistance." Families also understand the significance of a stable core structure for vertical design, so essential to the future accommodation of additional members.

Materials Accessibility and Quality

The response to conflict and different types of crises has given rise to a new indigenous type of experimental building in Gaza, but with implications for urban areas in other parts of the Middle East. Given the high cost of reconstruction and Gaza's land scarcity, alternative construction techniques aim to accommodate the social dimensions of reconstruction and the natural growth of extended families. I shall focus on two techniques: experimental architectural technologies and repairing damaged homes.

Experimenting with Architectural Technology

Experimental design projects have focused largely on using alternative building materials such as mud, sandbags, and wood scraps which are temporary solutions and inappropriate to the aim of creating a sustainable society and rebuilding the identity of the territory.[21] In fact, because of the shortage of construction materials following the 2008–9 Israeli attacks, UNRWA built around fifty houses using mud as an alternative to cement, the latter being more traditional and acceptable. The spread of mud-based construction was mainly influenced by three factors: (1) the absence of

skilled labor; (2) the limited capacity for constructing multi-story buildings; and (3) the need to avoid ongoing maintenance.[22] Yet the use of mud was problematic. For example, even if mud is treated using "compressed stabilized earth blocks," it can be used only as filler between concrete columns and not as a structural element.[23] In addition, extensive use of clay on a large scale can harm the agricultural sector by taking away already scarce land. Finally, the idea of building mud houses was not well received by all interviewed families for cultural reasons. Displaced people did not see it as an improvement to be moved from temporary accommodation in UNRWA schools into what they consider to be shacks. There is a perception that eco-build houses (especially earth build ones) are old-fashioned and represent "the past," and are therefore not fit for "modern" people to live in.

Given the urgent need for temporary shelters for those displaced as a result of the Israeli attack, affected families also had to accept—after much deliberation—the building of wooden houses by Catholic Relief Services as a stopgap measure until it was possible to obtain cement to build a "proper" house.

These shelter design experiments and the insecurity caused by Israeli military attacks led to substantial demographic and social changes for low-income extended families. One beneficiary of the transitional housing project said: "A wooden house is better than living in a tent. I live with my wife, my two daughters and two of my unmarried sons. My other three sons rented homes to live there with their wives and children."[24] People were commonly keen to point out that these transitional shelters broke the social ties of their extended families by forcing their sons to leave their original neighborhoods and move away in search of a flat to rent. Since land is scarce in the Gaza Strip, using such alternative construction techniques in a limited area, without considering the social dimensions of construction or engaging people in the process of rebuilding their homes and their lives, amounts, in practical effect, to wasting that piece of land.

In 2017, Catholic Relief Services, which had built the transitional wooden shelters, organized a design competition for emergency and transitional shelters using temporary materials. My proposal was rejected simply because I proposed to use reinforced concrete for the skeleton of transitional shelters, thus investing in the "hard half" with a view to providing for the future growth of the family.

On the basis of this and other encounters with the humanitarian donor community, I argue that they do not know how to respond to shelter/housing needs in contexts that depart from their experiences elsewhere. For example, donors traditionally assist countries with less complex housing designs, such as in rural Africa, South America, and South Asia. In addition, the proposed housing prototypes do not account for the skills of local construction workers, and they evince little if any interest in hiring them. This lack of understanding was among the factors that led to my conceptualization of the "architecture of the everyday," which includes repairing damaged houses.

Repairing Damaged Homes

By implementing simple, highly functional, and durable designs, the architecture of the everyday challenges the wisdom of some of the ostensibly cost-saving solutions proposed by international funding agencies, such as those involving mud, steel containers, and wooden shelters. It also questions some of the established categories in the theory of emergency practices and international development and intervention known as "pro-poor" and "participatory."[25]

My interest in aspects of everyday life, the techniques used for upgrading damaged houses, and their relation to the architecture of the everyday started in 2006 when I joined Islamic Relief Palestine (IRPAL) as an emergency architect. By reviewing this experience, I show how to better understand the experiences of low-income extended families and their quotidian domestic routines. The early engagement with local communities

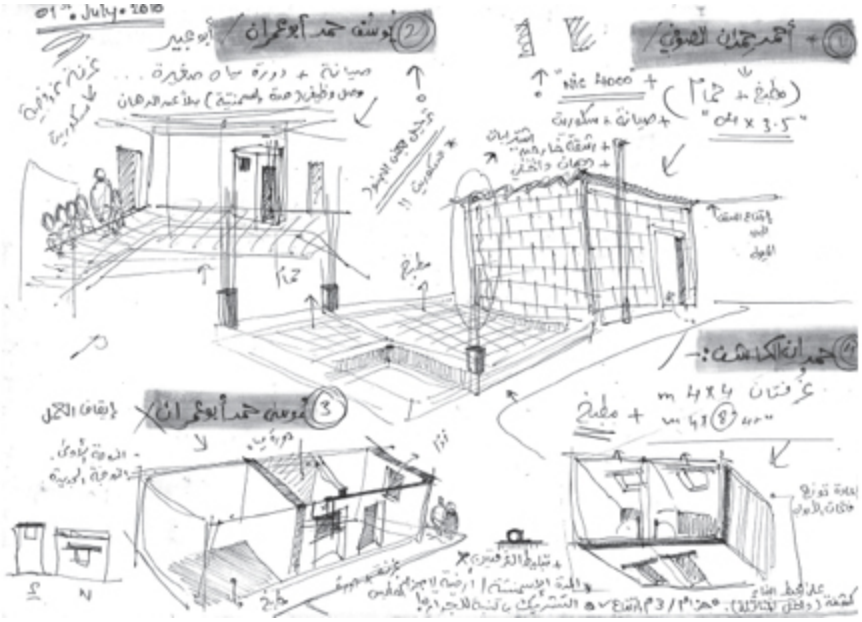
and subsequent practical experience working on building projects influenced my focus on the design component of damaged houses.

Rural areas in the Gaza Strip are dry and hot, the soil is sandy or consists of compacted clay, and there are also indigenous woods in some locations. Working in tandem with the architectural features of Gaza's buildings—natural fabrics, rough surfaces, and hard gray walls made of cement breeze blocks, both hollow and solid—the colors and textures of the site invite certain design solutions that consider the living arrangements of low-income extended families.[26]

In Beit Lahia and Al Shouka, for example, people have limited access to work and are mainly confined to construction and subsistence farming. Design reconstruction and rehabilitation are constrained by the impact of the long-drawn-out conflict. Moreover, "the housing problem is further compounded by the lack of legitimate authorities who ought to administer basic services."[27] In the case of Beit Lahia and Al Shouka, while access to service provision such as health and transport is difficult, there is, nevertheless, some legitimate government in place as well as an administrative network that can manage the situation on the ground. Most of these families live in scrap-built homes without access to water and adequate sanitation services, and must rely on their land and animals as their source of income. Design criteria are often severely constrained by immediate necessity, by limited availability of resources, and by the need to incur the lowest possible cost. Families still try to prioritize the social and financial investment in their houses so they may last for a lifetime, and for this reason they are keen to actively participate in the rehabilitation or building of their homes. Within this context, an emphasis on local needs, cultural norms, and common construction materials makes a strong case for buildings that comply with an expected image.

After the 2008–9 Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, a program to rehabilitate damaged houses was developed as part of an emergency response to enable the conflict-affected households to return to a normal life. The main objective was to provide 167 households with safe, adequate,

and durable permanent dwellings through house rehabilitation and (re)construction. As the designated architect and project coordinator, I visited more than two hundred individual houses to assess the needs of each family and then draw up plans for modifications. Time limitations and the emergency circumstances in the Gaza Strip meant that I had to establish direct connections with the beneficiary community. The project's operating assumption was that men were the heads of their households and would make the key decisions, regardless of whether women managed day-to-day domestic affairs; hence, few women were in a position to discuss their needs during home visits. Despite this, I focused on listening to families and ensuring that their concerns and ideas directly informed design. I actively sought to engage all family members, young and old, in the process of making and shaping their homes.



Researcher's sketches showing the structural requirements of each household. Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2009.

The Rehabilitation of Damaged Houses Project was frozen during the summer of 2007 because of the Israeli blockade and restrictions on accessing construction materials, particularly cement, aggregate, and steel

bars. However, we renewed the project in 2009 and began to prepare a detailed bill of quantities identifying the materials and supplies needed to begin work and tender documents used to request procurement bids. I held four meetings at the Beit Lahia and Al Shouka municipal town halls, and had each nominated household sign the project's contract. By December 2011, we rehabilitated 167 houses, improving the lives of more than 1,200 persons.

A house before rehabilitation (above) and after (below), including the addition of a new bathroom. Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2009.

The Design Phase

Community planning is usually a long, risky, and tedious process that requires relationships of trust with local communities.[28] In contrast, emergencies and conflicts require quick solutions because people are homeless. Transitional housing needs to be provided before planning can begin, and it is important to involve architects.[29] Moreover, "housing technologies [in Gaza] should respect and follow local socio-cultural conditions and changes and not vice versa."[30] Thus, when IRPAL project's consultants suggested the use of prototype buildings, with accessible designs that could be built in a standard grid, they risked failing to consider the culture, living habits, and family bonds of the people concerned. The

fabric of Palestinian rural and urban life relies on a pattern of extended family housing, whereby each house is built on a family plot and is later extended horizontally and/or vertically to accommodate newer generations.

For this reason, the IRPAL project team made certain decisions in the early stages and during the needs assessment phase that affected the social fabric through the duration of the project. The team promoted a design based on a basic housing unit, which would inform the building of prototypes and could be adjusted according to the needs of each family. These prototypes would allow for quicker reconstruction of the houses and reduce the cost of construction.[31]

For the design phase, I drew freehand sketches at each house site and took digital photographs of interior spaces and structural elements that required maintenance. My responsibilities, together with the civil engineer, included tracking local market prices and estimating costs. I participated in preparing bid documents with a bill of quantities, material specifications, general and special conditions, and basic architectural drawings. Targeted houses were rehabilitated and/or supported by the addition of permanent living and utility units. The units influenced the relationship of the existing building to its surroundings and privacy needs.[32] These were added to avoid the breakdown of social links and make use of available land. I made sketches to document the process of visualizing the design and outcome, and throughout the project always tried to engage interested family members in the process of design and implementation.

The research and planning processes were ongoing, dynamic, and flexible owing to the extent of the damage to the houses. The contractors had basic planning and implementation drawings; most of the details were developed and finalized on-site. My notes, sketches, and photographs based on my accounts of local construction expertise and the households' engagement were essential for documented communication.

Sketch notebook (which reflects the ideas of the homeowners in their housing design) and concrete (the material used to implement those ideas). Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2010.

The use of traditional building techniques increases the durability and lifespan of the homes. Many of these were limited given the blockade and airstrikes. To reduce costs, we used local materials, depending on their availability. Among the numerous challenges imposed by the siege was dependence on smuggled basic building materials, which were available only in the local markets.

The houses were rebuilt using reinforced concrete, corrugated sheeting, metal rods, and timbers, and the walls were made from breeze cement blocks. Influenced by the concept of “permanence,” these building

materials were selected as part of a stable core structure that would support future social growth and horizontal extension. The kitchen and bathroom were built as autonomous structures, closely following the trend of traditional vernacular architecture.[33] Households were offered three options for model unit cube structures to fit their various needs: a bedroom with a bathroom unit, a bedroom with a kitchen unit, and a kitchen plus a bathroom unit. These options doubled the family living area while maintaining the same building footprint. This avoided displacing beneficiaries, and conserved land area by adding the living and utility units to the existing houses. In addition, there was flexibility for some beneficiaries to rebuild on-site or on an alternative piece of land that they owned, providing that all legal requirements were met.

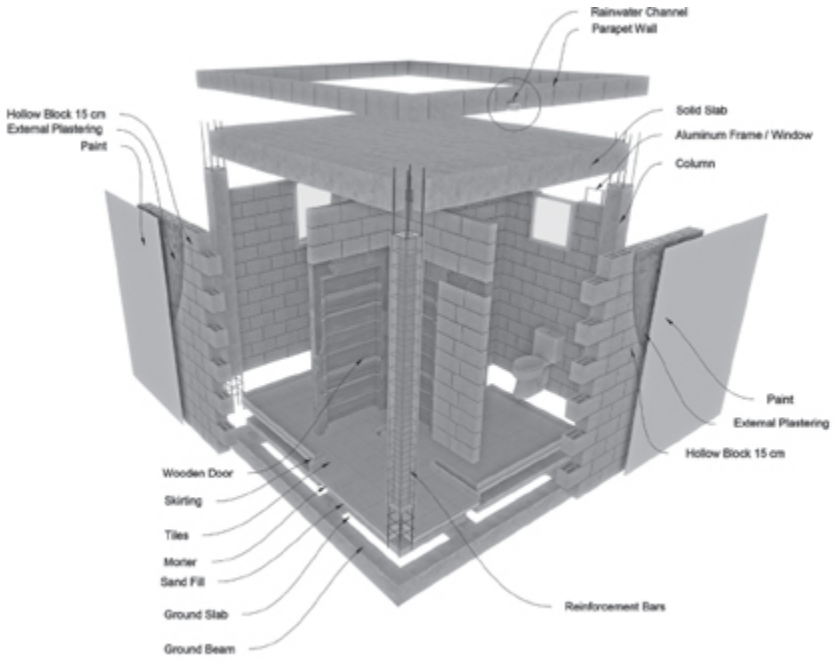
The focus on low-income housing and on improving living conditions in "informal" areas—rural and desert locations—also had to account for seasonal and environmental factors. A number of factors were addressed to ensure adequate ventilation and that indoor temperature was maintained at a comfortable level. For example, in the winter the cold air had come in through the openings and warm air had escaped through the metallic roof. In the summer, the houses were very hot, as the uninsulated corrugated iron roof sheets *(zinco* in local Arabic) would quickly heat up the interior, and poor ventilation would prevent the hot air from escaping. Thus, there were improvements in the roof structure's thermal mass, insulation was fitted, and some openings were designed for cross-ventilation. Construction was carried out by drawing extensively on an adequate knowledge of the site, ensuring that foundations were equipped with a thin layer of cement and a damp-proof course in order to prevent pests from coming into the buildings and moisture from rising from the ground into the walls.

In comparison to the old houses, with their dark interiors, the rehabilitated houses have more light and cross-ventilation. Many previously had no appropriate sanitation services (e.g., a latrine). For some families this was the first time they could use toilet facilities in privacy and in a sanitary manner. "When the new units were handed over, it was a moment

of joy for the households because they had the feeling, for the first time, that somebody was taking care of them," the mayor of Al Shouka Municipality said.[34]

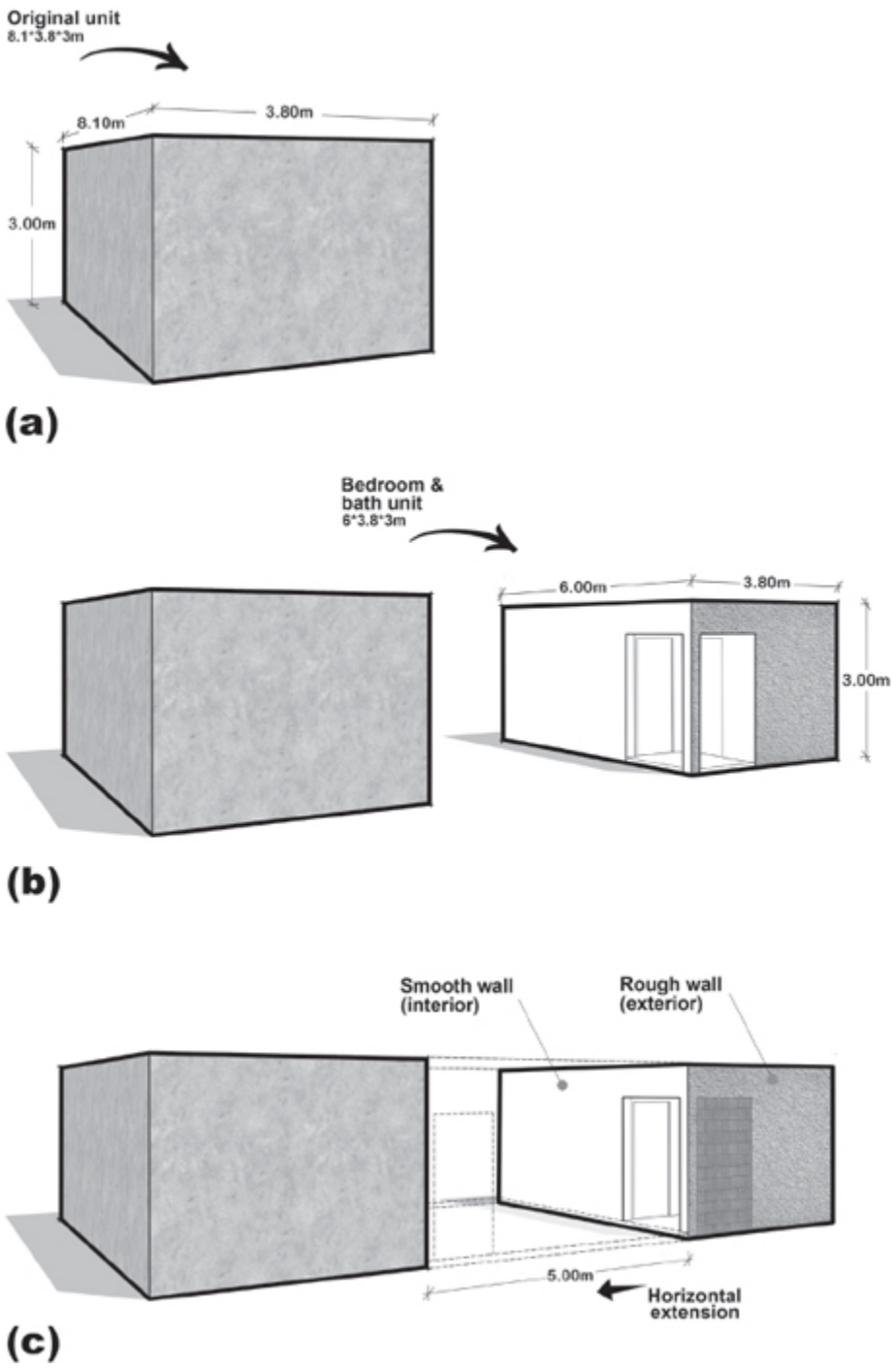
Project Simplicity and Cost Efficiency

Owing to the simplicity in design of the unit cube structure models and the additional units, the rehabilitation process only took about fifteen days to complete using skilled labor from the local community. By the end of the project in 2011, the estimated cost for the restoration of each residential unit was approximately $4,400, which is 55 percent less than the normal cost. It took seven months to rehabilitate/rebuild seventy housing units for the first group of beneficiaries. Their requirements were simple: a bedroom, a kitchen, a covered external area, and a washroom with a latrine. Although these new structures replaced basic facilities, the outcome was significant, because they previously had little more than a single-room tin shack with no water and with electricity supplied by a single wire slung from a nearby building. The approach reduced the need for large amounts of materials, most of which were expensive and not always available, and would necessitate time-consuming maintenance.



An exploded axonometric showing the layers of the basic housing unit. Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2011

This project was built on a philosophy of needs-based design and relied on employing transferable local knowledge according to a simple architectural framework, standards, and building methodology. This also allowed for a dynamic, slow, and controlled process. As noted above, I attempted to engage with as many members of each household as possible and to do this within a participatory framework, which was unfamiliar to me (and to them) at the time and not possible to fully achieve within the time frame of this type of emergency project. In addition to using my sketches and photographs to document each household and its needs, I considered the exchanges of hospitality with family members vital to learning more about the households' daily lives and about their families, marriages, and aspirations. This was essential for understanding domestic priorities, both present and future, and how these priorities might shape the future rebuilding of damaged or destroyed homes.



A design showing an option for horizontally extending a unit. Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2011

The project protected the extended family fabric while maintaining simplicity in home construction. Source: Salem Al Qudwa, 2012.

Given the blockade of the Gaza Strip, one benefit, albeit temporary, was the creation of jobs for unemployed workers. In addition, each contractor had to employ and train young builders. The training of young masons took place during all four phases of the project. Critically, training typically occurred on the job and at actual construction sites, in contrast to the way it had been undertaken in the past, in formal vocational training centers that were removed from the local community. Local masons learned how to construct reinforced roofs over an apprenticeship lasting three to six months, depending upon their prior experience. Beyond the work completed through this apprenticeship, some beneficiary families were able to partially manage the repair and upgrade of their own homes, with technical support from site engineers.[35] The household's contribution to monitoring, identifying, and addressing the quality of workmanship, and their feedback

on the contactors' level of professionalism held clear implications for the future that speak to individual empowerment and agency. However, one weakness of the communication process was that IRPAL did not establish a complaint mechanism before the start of the project, which could have addressed issues relating to time frame, cost monitoring, and workmanship, and which would have given families the option of providing feedback directly to the IRPAL office in Gaza.

Lessons Learned and the Architecture of the Everyday

My experience as an emergency architect and shelter manager for the Gaza Strip exposed me to the importance of humanitarian design in dealing with vulnerable and poor communities traumatized by conflict. This work has made me increasingly aware of the connection between aesthetics and dignity, and the importance of beauty and design for even the most deprived families. It has also taught me that the simplest and most minimal interventions can provide both beauty and dignity under the right circumstances.

With a view to improving the living conditions for low-income extended families going forward, it is important to understand the connection between theories regarding place-making and spatial awareness,[36] and the everyday practical needs of inhabitants and how these needs may be accommodated.[37] This was the framework for the Rehabilitation of Damaged Houses Project, which made extensive use of existing building methods. People in the Gaza Strip are accustomed to using cement as a primary building material, even though it is a banned "dual use" material during the Israeli blockade and acquiring it by official means is difficult. The project drew on the local "new vernacular" in Gaza, which is influenced by a notion of "permanence." As a core fabric, cement is the ideal material because it is long-lasting and inexpensive—especially in comparison with temporary alternatives, such as mud or wood. It requires

minimal maintenance, and its exterior surfaces need not be painted, nor sealed against exposure to changes in the weather.

The project, with its focus on the rehabilitation of damaged houses in rural areas, was a new direction for IRPAL and for me. Instead of working in urban informal settlements surrounding Gaza City, where all the other incremental houses have been self-built, the project team was asked to work in the northern and southern rural areas of the Gaza Strip. These marginalized communities presented their own set of challenges, plus a whole new set of useful relationships that were formed with the local partner NGO in Beit Lahia and with the municipality of Al Shouka. For example, although IRPAL offered project information and engagement sessions only to men in these small, remote communities, I found that the women of the households made constructive contributions relating to the priorities for the rehabilitation process. Moreover, despite being a native Arabic speaker and a Palestinian resident of Gaza City, I faced language barriers while working with the Bedouin community in Al Shouka. In addition, IRPAL did not give enough time to conduct proper home visits or home-based participatory design sessions with the Bedouin households, mainly the women.

No physical, design, or construction activities involved women during the implementation of the project: this needs to be changed in future initiatives. In Gazan society men are considered to be the family representative. As head of the household, the man is expected to provide for and fully protect his wife and children. This responsibility may include the care of his elderly mother, unwed sisters, and any other vulnerable members of his extended family. Yet, it was obvious throughout the project that women are extremely resilient and capable. During the design process, I noted that some women, while describing their daily activities, suggested improvements to the overall design plan that were both functional and creative. These suggestions emphasized privacy and protection for women and children, and they were also mindful of proper ventilation and natural lighting. In future projects, the constructive engagement of women should

be prioritized by hiring a female social worker and a female site engineer, which did not occur in the IRPAL project.

I visited all 167 houses one year after the project's completion and noted that only minor maintenance was needed. Residents received some technical guidance, such as how to fill cracks in roofs to prevent rainwater leakage and how to conserve water. We also encouraged people to plant food-producing gardens around their houses. Ownership is not only a matter of finances and legalities, it is a matter of dignity and empowerment.

In line with the household dynamics of the beneficiary community, the lessons I learned from the project's consultative phase were central to my design focus on how to improve and adapt the three-model unit cube structure on a wider scale, while considering local culture, daily practices, and extended family bonds.[38] The significance of spending time with each household during home visits was a key lesson from the IRPAL project and is an important factor in building trust and restoring agency that goes well beyond filling out project feedback questionnaires. In addition, shelter design projects should support flexibility and allow for adaptation to changing needs and circumstances at an individual household level through a self-help and/or contractor-led approach. This will ensure the households' engagement with and expectations of the project as well as the management of the reconstruction process and the development of its structural phases.

In this vein, social tensions or the absence of a sense of belonging in relation to the built environment and place-making may have enduring consequences for the whole family. For example, the wife of one beneficiary left her home and children, returning to her parents' household, after learning her unemployed husband could not complete the extended family house and provide her with an appropriate independent living area. Her husband commented: "The building materials were expensive, but I had the financial help of others, so I built two walls between the columns on the ground floor. I hope that the new added room will encourage my wife to return to take care of our six children. My mother is taking care of them right now." Drawing on evidence based on cultural norms and local needs,

Rapoport has argued that the constraints imposed by the wider environment on domestic space not only determine its functionality in providing accommodation, but also the degree to which it ensures privacy and the preservation of life.[39]

A Concluding Thought: Implications for the Future

Initiatives in conducting research into shelter design in the Gaza Strip are limited.[40] As I have discussed, in the context of participatory design and the process of place-making,[41] the "social logic of space" and household dynamics[42] are not sufficiently considered in planning and in determining the housing needs of extended families. Steps have been taken toward shaping a more appropriate humanitarian response and technical assistance approach to shelter design in the aftermath of military attacks on Gaza, but more is needed to make further progress in this area including:

1. The emergency shelter solutions that international NGOs offer as an immediate response (such as steel containers, sandbags, mud and wooden shelters) are inadequate to address the housing crisis and often fall short in their use of available resources;

2. Investing in less temporary disaster-relief shelters is more economical because it addresses immediate needs in the form of transitional shelters, and also creates a foundation for a more permanent solution to Gaza's ongoing housing shortages; and

3. There is a local attachment to the reinforced concrete structure, which is seen as permanent and a foundation for future expansion by and for the family; as such, it epitomizes the physical identity of houses in the Gaza Strip, now the "new vernacular."

Hence, by involving the local population, which must include the voice of women in both the upgrading of existing damaged houses and the design and building of new ones, I learned that architects can establish a

framework for mutual exchange of knowledge and skills. My experience as an emergency architect was limited when I was first offered a role as a project architect. My engagement with 167 families taught me that project success depends on including them in the process of repair work and design from the project's early stages, despite the difficult sociopolitical context of the Gaza Strip and scarcity of materials.

Furthermore, rehabilitating houses using the simple, durable, and highly functional three-model unit cube structure can be done anywhere in the Gaza Strip. As Davis writes, "Healthy architecture has traditionally developed through common, culturally embedded knowledge of building, along with the political and economic ability to put that knowledge to use."[43] In this way, "participation" is understood as something deeper and more meaningful than "a facade of good intentions."[44] My work with Islamic Relief Palestine allowed me to develop a comprehensive list of indicators and requirements that reflect and give shape to the architecture of the everyday in ways relevant to future projects in other contexts ravaged by conflict and displacement.[45]

A Palestinian woman is sitting next to a kerosene lamp in her house during a power blackout in Jabaliya Refugee camp, north of the Gaza strip. February 6, 2012. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

People’s Light in Gaza’s Darkness

Suhail Taha

How long does it take for a crisis to become a state of being? Gazans are in the fifteenth year of a devastating electricity “crisis” as a direct consequence of the Israeli occupation’s ongoing blockade and its perennial bombing campaigns against this part of Palestine. Two-thirds of Gaza’s power is under the control of the oppressor, which can switch it off and on at will. Much of the remainder comes from Gaza’s sole power plant, which Israeli bombers destroyed twice, in 2006 and 2014. The Israeli occupation authorities have subjected that plant and the wider electric grid to periodic damage ever since. During 2017–18, the average daily availability of electricity in Gaza was seven hours. Between 2019 and 2021, it hovered between twelve and thirteen hours. However, during intensive Israeli assaults, it can fall to four hours per day, as occurred in May 2021.[1]

On the Fall of Maslow’s Pyramid

> We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles.[2]
>
> —Thomas Edison

In 2018, the World Bank published an article entitled “Access to Energy Is at the Heart of Development.”[3] It asserts that a billion of the world’s people live without electricity, and hundreds of millions more live with intermittent electricity that they cannot depend on for their livelihood. The article also acknowledges that some countries have achieved definite progress in

improving access to electricity by setting firm policies supported by a system of incentives created by powerful institutions.

The article concludes by affirming the World Bank's commitment to assisting countries in working toward achieving sufficient, affordable, and dependable energy as an essential part of the Bank's goals of overcoming poverty and strengthening shared prosperity. It features an image of a Tanzanian family of seven, including four children, watching television in a humble but well-lit home. The room is illuminated while the fan and the television are on, and everyone smiles as if the family were unaware of being photographed. But, looking more closely, one can't escape the impression that the whole scene is a fake, smiles included, and that the article reader can't possibly be one of the billions living without electricity.

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which consists of seventeen goals to improve people's lives. The seventh goal states that the UN envisions a world "where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy."[4]

Such pronouncements by international organizations that are ostensibly geared toward the uplift of the world's poor and disenfranchised are clearly aimed at those with political power, not those without electricity. The conditions in the Gaza Strip give the lie in no uncertain terms to the absurdity of such reports (and the fanciful images that invariably accompany them).

Case in point: three years after issuing its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN issued a report indicating that Gaza would be unlivable by 2020. Clearly, the working group that determined the time frame for global sustainable development excluded Gaza from its plan. Otherwise, how could the same organization claim no one would be able to live there ten years before its projection for global improvement? The fact is that more than two million people live in an area of 365 square kilometers, meaning that the Gaza Strip must be one of the most "vibrant" areas on earth.

As for plans to electrify the world, what should a Palestinian from Gaza who worries about electricity daily think when coming across words like “guarantee,” “everyone,” “affordable,” “reliable,” and “sustainable”? What is a Gazan supposed to think about these wishful goals and the concurrent acknowledgment that their situation is inviable?

The first lesson about electricity in Gaza is not to believe everything you hear.

If we could look at the Earth from space, we would find that the rich and powerful countries of this world are the most luminous. Since lighting is a form of energy, it is also a form of power and money. In a world in which capitalism undergirds economic decision-making, so-called humanitarian aid is bound to serve the interests of those who nominally offer it to others. Therein lies the essentially political nature of placing electricity on the list of provisions deemed humanitarian. Considering electricity as a basic need has become a foregone conclusion, and would force Abraham Maslow—were he to return to life—to rearrange his vision of the hierarchy of human needs.

Abu Tariq’s Musings: The Politics of Electricity, Chickens, Eggs, and Wheat

Abu Tariq is not a university graduate or formally educated. However, he is deeply cultured, well-read and, by necessity, a student of politics. He lives in the Shuja’iyya neighborhood in Gaza and works as a handyman specializing in electricity. He is, in effect, a conservator of energy. He recalls a nursery rhyme from his childhood that goes along the lines of: “The box needs a key, the key is with the blacksmith, the blacksmith wants an egg, the egg is with the hens, the hens want wheat, the wheat needs the mill, and the mill is closed due to muddy water.” According to Abu Tariq:

> This little song helps us understand the problem of electricity in Gaza and the roles of the World Bank, international aid agencies, the Israeli occupation, and other governments. If [Palestinian Authority president] Abu Mazin agrees with [Hamas chief Ismai’il] Haniyya, that would mean there won’t be electricity in both the West Bank and Gaza. However, if Haniyya agrees with

> Abu Mazin and the latter speaks to the Americans (the muddy water), and the Americans speak with the Israeli occupation (the shutdown mill), and the European Union (the hens) issues a statement, and the World Bank (the egg) funds the international aid agencies (the blacksmith) that announce the building of an electric power plant in Gaza (the sealed box) and plan for alternatives to electricity, then it might be possible to acquire electricity (the key) in Gaza.

The second lesson about electricity in Gaza is that the night is always longer than the day.

By 2014, Salma reached her fifteenth year without ever experiencing a whole day with electricity. Over the last fifteen years Abu Tariq has come to know that access to light in Gaza is a purely political matter and has nothing to do with Gaza as poverty-stricken or underdeveloped. In fact, there is a political price to be paid for electricity or its absence. If, for example, the current government in Gaza suddenly announced to the world that it accepts Trump's Deal of the Century and that it appreciated the efforts of the US administration in safeguarding the well-being of the Palestinian people, then it's likely that every corner of the Gaza Strip would light up entirely in a minute. Yet, Abu Tariq would feel shame for lighting his home at the cost of giving up Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley, and one-third of the West Bank. Instead, he puts his mind at peace in the midst of pitch-black darkness. What could be more beautiful than a darkness that keeps reminding us of our steadfastness, a darkness interrupted only by the light of the moon? For "he who clouds the moon doesn't avoid the night."

A City That Masters Darkness

> You cannot define electricity. The same can be said of art. It is a kind of inner current in a human being, or something which needs no definition.[5]
>
> —Marcel Duchamp

Darkness is a regular feature of the newspapers: "Khan Yunis Immersed in Darkness," "Darkness Envelops the Gaza Strip and Its Eight Camps," "Gaza Faces Injustice and Darkness," "Gaza Darkened: Sharp Decline in the Energy Situation," "Gaza, City of Darkness," "Darkness Swallows

Gaza," "Demonstrations: Thousands Demand Electricity." Hundreds of headlines like these have confronted the situation of energy and electricity in the Gaza Strip. They appear almost as regularly as, and in conjunction with, news of reconciliation efforts between the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. In these circumstances, one cannot but point to the irony of having one country under occupation with two governments, a government with electricity and a government without electricity.

To overcome darkness is to master all the skills necessary to survive without electricity. This not only acclimates people to living without it, but also inspires new survival methods, enabling them to engage in economic and social life in ways that reduce their dependence on electricity. This process is already underway. In practical terms, driver Iyad Khalaf made the news with a car powered by cooking oil.[6] Since the imposition of the siege, Gaza City has seen the emergence of innovative art works that reflect the situation in Gaza, including the challenge of living without electricity, such as creating art sculptures out of sand on the beach, decorating cacti and other plants, and transforming the ruins of destroyed buildings into art galleries. "Light at the End of the Tunnel," an art exhibition held in Gaza under the theme "The Art of Hope," was staged by fourteen young men and women from the Gaza Strip and displayed more than sixty paintings. They used the paint brush to evoke hope for a better future. Shown to patients in Gaza hospitals, the paintings have served to raise spirits.[7]

International news agencies are not by nature interested in these stories.

What is electricity? Charged particles in the form of electrons and protons? A commodity for sale? A necessity of life? A barometer of development? A political strategy aimed at reducing an entire population to subservience? Or is its absence a problem to be solved by creativity and imagination? Is it, as Duchamp would have it, as nebulous and as powerful as art?

Salma's Worst Birthday: The Night of November 14, 2011

Just a week before Salma turned eleven, Abu Tariq convened a family meeting with his wife, Farida. They told the children that they would have to implement harsh austerity measures, beginning at the start of the next month. Although these meetings had become a monthly ritual so that the children fully understood the family's deteriorating financial situation, Salma still hoped her father would bring her a telescope for her birthday. Her confidence in her father's unwillingness to disappoint her was greater than her understanding of the family's dire state of affairs.

Salma's birthday coincided with the El Clásico match between Barcelona and Real Madrid, and her brother Tariq had initially planned to miss the birthday party to watch the match with a group of friends on television. Her mother had prepared to bake a cake, while Salma's little brother Khaled was preparing a CD tape and had made sure to charge the camera's battery in order to take pictures.

With his El Clásico plans thwarted by a power outage, Tariq was the first to show up and get the party started. Salma's mother put biscuits on the table instead of a cake, while Khalid decided to sing instead of playing the CD. When Abu Tariq started to light candles, Salma could see the gift he had brought, and a feigned smile that couldn't conceal the disappointment showed on her face.

Salma lives in Gaza City. The roof of her building is narrow and crammed with water tanks and clotheslines. At night, when all the city's lights go out, Salma finds a place to lie for hours on end between the water tanks. Every once in a while, her father finds her sleeping on the roof and carries her to her bed. Salma does not lie on the roof to sleep, but to lie in wait for a meteor to break through the darkness.

As her birthday party came to a close, Salma rushed up the stairs to the rooftop to lay down and catch a shooting star. It was only minutes before a beam of light shot through the sky. Her heartbeat quickened and her eyes froze. Within seconds the light disappeared, followed by a deafening blast.

Since then, the roof of the building has become Salma's most feared place in Gaza. She's scared to death of seeing something blast through the sky.

An Ode to Bread and Electricity

It is not uncommon for sections of the Gaza Strip to be without electricity for twenty hours a day. What is worse is that one can never be certain when the power will go off. If bread is necessary for sustenance, and electricity is the source of development, then how can we talk about a better future for Gaza?

The third lesson in Gaza: You do not have to wait for electricity to get your things done.

Tiny Bread, or How Not to Spoil Lots of Flour

Only four hours of electricity a day is hard enough, but what's even worse is that the outages arrive irregularly. This forces people to adjust the timing of tasks that require electricity to the availability of power. Some folks wake up early in the morning—between two and five—to complete chores such as washing, ironing, cooking, studying for an exam, or sending an email. As a result, homemakers must avoid the risk of spoiling batches of dough by preparing only small portions of bread at a time.

What's more is that the electricity crisis is intertwined with the water crisis, as the lack of synchronicity between the power and water schedules thwart the regular filling of water tanks, which Gazans need in order to access water reserves during the periods their water is cut off.

Few Candles, Too Many Lives

In April 2012, a candle caused the death of three children (Raed, age 4; Nadine, 7; and Farah, 6) in Deir al-Balah by setting fire to their bedroom.[8] In May 2016, three children (Rahif, 4; Yusra, 5; and Nasser, 6) died after a candle caused a fire in their bedroom in the Shati refugee camp in the western Gaza Strip.[9] In September 2020, three children (Yousef, 4; Mohammad, 5; and Mahmoud, 6) died in the Nuseirat camp also after a candle ignited a fire near where they slept.[10]

These children died as a result of perpetual power cuts, the lack of fuel, and the closure of the crossings to and from the Gaza Strip. Death by candlelight is not a result of Gaza's failure to develop. It's a matter of a deliberate Israeli policy to break the people of Gaza.

A Scene from 2014: Darkened Homes under Lit Sky

The whole family is gathered in one dark room. Khalid and Salma sit next to each other, leaning against the wall with folded legs and knees, while their older brother, Tariq, lies on a mattress in the middle of the room. Mother and father are on the sofa while Salma's grandmother sits on a plastic chair in one corner of the room (as grandmothers do) overlooking a window. From here, she can see the door of the house and keep track of any movement inside the house and on the street leading to it. She recites Qur'anic verses in a voice so muffled that all that can be heard is the whistling of the "s" sound: "was ...*was*... *was*..."

It is one of the long nights of the 2014 summer war. Everyone has withdrawn to their home to sit and imagine possible scenarios in silence, as is the custom. The only positive course of action is for everyone to remain as they are. There is nothing left to discuss.

Khaled is ten. His voice is the only thing alive in that dark room—a voice without an image. His words provide the only relief from that night's insomnia. Salma is next to Khaled, thinking about the most appropriate thing to say to him in case their house is bombed. She remembers the "sock

game,” where everyone puts on their socks and the person who can get both socks off first wins. What a fun game full of laughter and giggling! Salma thinks about playing this game without anyone thinking that it might be the last time. Is it really a good time to talk about games? In the end, she decides to stick to tradition and not talk. As for Khaled, he is less aware of the significance of adhering to this tradition. He says, “In the Wednesday raid a girl from the third grade left us; in the Thursday raid it was a boy from the fifth grade; the Friday raid took the science teacher from us . . . Only the ninth and seventh grades haven’t lost anyone.”

The possibilities that might befall the family are getting closer and closer. Salma spends most of the time listening and pondering. While she is getting used to the idea that all possibilities are possible, she seeks out the positive outcomes. She wants to say to Khaled, “Even if we are martyred, we will play the sock game in heaven.”

Her brother Tariq is silent the whole time, worrying about whether he can get certified copies of university diplomas submitted before the application deadline for the French government scholarship. With universities closed, the chances of getting an extension are weak. “How,” he wonders, “do I send an email to find out, when there is no electricity? On top of that, no El Clásico between Barcelona and Madrid. Damn electricity! I can’t even access my Instagram. Damn it! Damn! Damn! Damn the electricity!”

Like most fathers, Abu Tariq is used to spending most of his time watching the news on television, which, again, is impossible without electricity. The darkness they experience is more than the darkness of the room. The darkness in Gaza is more than the lack of light. When the electricity goes out, Gazans are enveloped in a debilitating state of fear, perpetual waiting, and deep-seated anxiety.

At last, Khalid surrenders to sleep, and in the stillness that now accompanies the darkness, grandmother’s muttering becomes intelligible: “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a

glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light."[11]

The fourth lesson about electricity in Gaza is that people hear better in the dark.

The ABCs of Darkness

On one of those strings of winter nights when each night, like the one before, left us without electricity, Salma complains to her father about not being able to study under the dim light of a candle. Her father jokes that he will talk to a friend of his, Aladdin, to see if he can borrow a bigger lamp from him. Salma is old enough not to believe the story of Aladdin's lamp and she doesn't find the joke very amusing. She is now at an age that she understands the importance of studying and that Aladdin's lamp and her mother's prayers will not deliver electricity. All that's important is to light the room so she can complete her studies, so she has managed to synchronize her homework schedule with the intermittent electricity as best she can. Shouldn't the school be doing something to help students? For months Salma has been pushing her classmates to petition the school so that the long vacation takes place during the winter, since there's more daylight during the summer.

Like most grandmothers, Salma's sees things differently. Sitting on her exposed perch by the window, situated in a strategic spot in the house where she overhears all the conversations, she remarks, "My dear, when I was your age, everyone lived without electricity and the children still studied. How sweet they were!" Salma looks at her grandmother and decides to keep her thoughts to herself. Grandmother continues, "Your generation is spoiled. You want everything to come to you." Salma looks at her and again chooses to keep quiet. Grandmother goes on, "Your kind thinks they are living in paradise; they don't even know how to sit without

electricity . . . May God damn whoever invented electricity.” Salma looks at her grandmother again and quickly decides to leave the room.

A Persistent Will to Survive

> *The homeland is where none of this can happen.*[12]
>
> —Ghassan Kanafani

A person is born in this big world and moves around it, while in Gaza a person remains in their place and the world moves around them. In this, one of the world’s most crowded places, more than two million people live in a 140 square mile prison. Houses and buildings join forces to take over what space remains as nature takes its last breath, wastewater pollutes the sea around us, poverty grows, unemployment climbs, the health system falters, and the infrastructure crumbles. Meanwhile, we become accustomed to the sound of death carried above our heads by helicopters, to the contraction of the city around us, to the fishermen who could be sailing for the last time, to the loved ones who leave the Strip, their villages becoming like the abandoned villages we hear about from our elders, and to wars which reduce friends to half of their former selves, limbs amputated and organs missing.

This is not all that Gaza means; it means we live in spite of it all.

In the open prison known as Gaza, the population grows while the space shrinks. Constant construction overtakes the city’s natural green. The fourth lesson about Gaza is to look at every beautiful city scene, as it may not be there the next time you look. Thus, the artists of Gaza assuage frustrations as they preserve the beauty of a country that is bound to be uprooted.

As for electricity, in Gaza the people arrange their lives around it. The rhythms of life in Gaza follow the daily repetitions of “The electricity went out.” Children everywhere share the same kind of excitement when given a

chocolate bar, when offered a surprise visit to an amusement park, or when gifted a puppy. As for the children in Gaza, the same powerful feeling rises up in their hearts when we tell them, “The electricity is coming.” Unfortunately these moments of excitement do not last. It has become impossible for Palestinians in Gaza to imagine a life where they are not plunged back into darkness and despair on a regular basis.

The fifth lesson about Gaza is that if you can survive without electricity, you can survive anything.

Gaza: Where to From Here?

If there were no television, newspapers, or libraries, the people of Gaza would assume that their reality is the same as the rest of the world. For someone born into captivity, it’s hard to imagine a better reality. One learns from a better reality in order to create one.

Inevitably, constant torment cultivates an unusual yearning to live in the heart of every Gazan. The reality is that there are plenty of examples of innovation in the Gaza Strip that allow us to imagine a different Gaza.

From Bus 11 to a Racing Car

Unemployment and poverty prevent many Gazans from owning cars, but Gaza is nothing if not the place where the adage “Necessity is the mother of invention” applies. First came the invention of “bus number 11,” which refers to walking on two feet. The worse the economic conditions are, the more Gazan creativity flourishes. In January 2020, Muhammad al-Dabbah built a racing car with a 160-horsepower engine that reached a speed of 160 miles per hour.[13] Al-Dabbah’s car draws large numbers of people to watch it parade around the beach, who know full well that the occupying power has banned racing cars from the Strip.

Scooter Owners Say Goodbye to Punctures

Abdallah al-Radi', the owner of a shop for airless tires, sports a large sign at the entrance to the shop that reads "Farewell to Punctures."[14] Scooter owners are not the only ones pleased by this development; so are Gazan amputees and others who are wheelchair-bound. Says Abdallah, "The idea behind making airless tires came as a result of the Israeli ban on pneumatic (air-filled) tires from entering the Gaza Strip. This makes it difficult to find tires for wheelchairs or bicycles. For a long time, scooter owners who are amputees as a result of war had been pleading for a solution to their plight."

Abdallah was driven to find a solution for people with special needs who depend on wheelchairs to get around or who might need to make up for a lost limb with a pneumatic tire at an exorbitant price, provided one is even available. The solution came to Abdallah when he developed a mold for a solid tire that was the same thickness as a pneumatic one. Owners of motor scooters and mobility scooters are now done with the dangers posed by nails on the road and free from the obstacle of having to replace pneumatic tires.

Abdallah still faces two challenges in producing these tires. First, the ban on the entry of metals into the Gaza Strip forces him to create metal alloys from other materials. Second, the constant electrical outages makes it necessary to continuously heat and reheat the metal, complicating the smelting process. "Business owners and innovators in Gaza have to swim through a sea of suffering to succeed," concludes Abdallah. One of his customers adds a word of appreciation: "With these tires, I move in peace independently. I hope everyone will back this project because it supports people with special needs."

Whereas these challenges invite innovation and strategies for survival, they do not provide for a livelihood. Halfway through its second decade, Gaza's electricity "crisis" is a condition of life for a people besieged by the Israeli occupation from land, air, and sea. Rosy UN pronouncements and the politicization of humanitarianism offer no succor. Instead, as poets and artists teach us, the spirit to live—that light in the midst of the deepest

darkness—persists. Undeterred by a situation in which the hazards of being a child include death by candlelight, Salma plots out the moves in a game that is destined to continue, even if into the afterlife. Lives that turn from long bouts of waiting in the dark to scrambling to maximize spurts of power have developed new lessons to live—if not thrive—by. The hope is for a day when a power outage for a family becomes not a moment of mortal danger but a pleasant ritual of getting together in a cozy room to tell stories by candlelight. For a child, not a nightmare but their most beautiful evening.

A Palestinian girl walks next to a Banksy mural of children using an Israeli army watchtower as a swing ride, on a wall in Beit Hanoun town, in the northern Gaza Strip. April 10, 2015. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Restoring Palestinian Rights and Improving the Quality of Life

Nour Naim, translated by Anas Abu Samhan

The global spread of artificial intelligence (AI) and its applications in all walks of life, which has resulted from the current Fourth Industrial Revolution, has created a great opportunity to reshape how we manage life as we adapt to new needs and realities. We can exploit digital programming to solve problems and resolve dilemmas creatively.

AI is an important pillar in the manufacture of all sorts of technology, including machines and computers that carry out tasks resembling those performed by intelligent creatures, including the ability to think and learn from previous experiences. AI also aims to create smart systems that provide services like educational counseling, community service, and other charity work that helps people. AI has become part and parcel of our daily life, beginning with commuting between cities, avoiding traffic jams, and using virtual assistants to do different tasks.

I think this is important as it may provide an avenue for optimism in Gaza, a place home to conditions so bleak that observers, including the United Nations, have concluded that it is no longer livable there. The situation has deteriorated because of Israel's siege, which has squandered any chance of a decent life, let alone allowed Palestinians in Gaza to utilize technological tools. Israel itself has built advanced AI systems that it denies to the Palestinians. For example, Israeli intelligence operations that took hours in the past now take mere minutes to carry out. This is not only a leap in efficiency but also in operational effectiveness, according to a

propaganda piece published by *Israel Hayom*.[1] This new reality makes every Palestinian living in the Gaza Strip even more nervous, because it shows how the Israeli occupation is invested in AI and attempts to own and shape its tools to control Palestinians.

The Palestinian economy faces unprecedented crises resulting from Israel's hegemony over all aspects of life. Through restrictions imposed by the occupation on all economic sectors in Gaza, especially on technology and telecommunication, Israeli has fostered a neoliberal economic agenda that suffocates the digital space, leading to what might be called a "digital occupation" of Gaza. This manifests in such agreements as those between Israel and the Palestine Telecommunications Company (Paltel). This has deepened the reliance of the Palestinian economy on Israel and turned high-tech Palestinian companies into proxies for Israel.[2] Israel also hinders the import of basic raw materials used in manufacturing, on the pretext that they are "dual use" materials, thereby rendering such sectors inactive. Thus, by tightly regulating Gaza's only commercial crossing, Karim Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing, Israel bars important materials that may contribute to developing Gaza's technologies. Further, Israel restricts internet access through its control of underground lines and cellular infrastructure, which means Palestinian technologies can only develop in the spaces that Israel allows, in line with its repressive colonial policies. Such systematic oppression hinders any development in the Gaza Strip in the field of technology and deprives Palestinians the benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, including AI, robots, the Internet of things, cloud computing, big data, self-driving vehicles, 3D printers, nanotechnology, biotechnology, energy storage, quantum computing, and remote work. This comes at a time when the world is heading toward the post-digital era.[3]

I seek to imagine a better future for the Gaza Strip and its inhabitants. Within the general vision of ending the catastrophic impacts of the Nakba by implementing the right of return, restoring rights, and achieving justice through the technologies of the digital age and AI, I attempt to construct a framework through which to reinforce the Palestinian narrative. This will

also help us use these technologies more effectively and appropriately; that, in turn, will help Gaza break its imposed isolation and bridge the digital and knowledge gap enforced by the Israeli occupation, which relies on and reinforces a Zionist narrative created before the Nakba and adapted to modern technological development. Palestinians, particularly those living under siege in Gaza, should exploit the technological revolution to reinforce their collective power. This will also help us build a strong front based on a diversely unique and interconnected narrative to help us end the isolation imposed upon us as a form of collective punishment.

I first focus on the impact of Israel's use of AI and digital programming to repress Gaza and its people and promote its fake narrative. I next discuss how AI can improve the quality of life in Gaza, even under the current political situation.

Israel Uses AI to Repress Gaza

Gaza is a small place of 365 square kilometers, besieged by land, air, and sea, and one of the most crowded areas on earth. Israel has turned it into a lab to test and develop AI technologies, without any international monitoring and legal accountability. Israeli control centers invade the privacy of the two million Palestinians who live there by watching them closely, creating a complex digital siege that enhances Israel's territorial containment of the Strip. Israel's monitoring includes stealing and storing peoples' private information, making Gaza an important source of big data that can be applied in AI algorithms. This information can be used in times of war to guide attacks as well as promote Israel's technological industries. Thus, Israel's goal is twofold: gain profit, by creating a sustainable economy, and achieve domination, by imposing its rule as a military force over the land.

Scrutinizing the Zionist project's success in the technological field helps us objectively understand the enemy occupier. I also aim to shed light on

Israel's crimes and its continuous harassment, done without legal accountability despite the efforts of rights organizations and activists.

Israel's main motive behind competing in AI military technologies is the absence of any natural resources that might turn it into an effective economic power. Thus, Israel has become a world pioneer in the field of cyber security and a hub for many security companies. Some of Israel's most significant institutes in the field of advanced hi-tech and military manufacturing include Elbit Systems, Israel Aerospace Industries, and Rafael Advanced Defense Systems. These companies stand behind Israel's drones, missiles, and fighter jets. Indeed, the geopolitical situation—Israel's complete control over a wide geographical area spanning the Gaza Strip and the buffer zones along its borders—as well as advances in technology have become key factors in reshaping Israel's security environment, which has manifested in military assaults against the Palestinian people.[4]

Israel has substantially advanced its military capabilities, whether in its air force, missiles, or defense system, by making its intelligence superior through modern technology. This includes enhancing the capacity of its drones and satellites for military purposes. These capabilities can be witnessed in Israel's remote-controlled extrajudicial assassinations of Palestinians, including during Israel's 2014 war on Gaza and its aggression in 2021. Israel uses guided missiles to kill innocent civilians while bragging that it has waged the world's first-ever war via modern AI technologies. A May 2021 article in the *Jerusalem Post* revealed that the Israeli army's elite Unit 8200 pioneered deep learning algorithms and technologies and used them for military purposes, leading to new programs called Alchemist, Gospel, and Depth Wisdom.[5] It also used AI tools and technologies such as SIGINT (signal intelligence), VISINT (visual intelligence), HUMINT (human intelligence), and GEOINT (geographical intelligence) to collect massive raw data and information to be used for future operations. The article claims that Unit 9900 used satellite images of Gaza's topography to accurately determine the locations of rocket launchers. By detecting

changes in the terrain, the images were able to mark launching positions to be bombed. Using its collaborators on the ground to spy on Palestinian resistance forces, Israel precisely mapped the resistance's secret tunnel network, including the depth, thickness, and paths of the tunnels. Moreover, for the first time, Unit 8200's Alchemist radar system alerted the Israeli army to possible future attacks so that the army could take the necessary precautions.

Envisioning the shape of conflict in the Gaza Strip is not an easy task, as is clear from the importance Israel attaches to its technological developments. Recent reports have discussed how the Data Analysis Division in the Israeli army's Northern Command established a division called Gaza Smart Space. In an investigative article titled "A Peek into the Research Division at the Armed Forces," Hanan Greenwood revealed that the Israeli occupation, attentive to Gaza's dynamic reality, established this new division to rapidly locate targets to be eliminated with the help of AI, as well as to analyze vast amounts of big data: "The reality in Gaza is particularly dynamic, with an enemy gone, so we need to bring the information at a rapid pace to the operational units in the field, producing a mix that was not there before to increase our effectiveness and lethality. Reality requires us to use much more technologically advanced tools."[6] The extensive efforts in this field are led by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS).[7]

One might question the reason behind these Israeli fears and concerns, given that Gaza's space and capabilities are very limited and it is under complete Israeli control. Let me make the reasoning clearer. Israel's essential military doctrine of blitzkrieg—characterized by a surprise attack using rapid, overwhelming force to achieve victory in a few hours—is focused on moving the battle to the enemy's terrain while keeping the internal front secure. This has failed. Israel can no longer occupy Arab lands while settlers sit in cafés and enjoy the beach. The Israeli military machine has made significant progress in its firepower, supported by

modern technology, but that machine faces fundamental weaknesses directly related to the reality of Gaza.

First, the development of Gaza's missile capabilities has led to the emergence of an internal front inside the Zionist entity. Israel's cities, settlements, and economic facilities are no longer far removed from any potential war. These Palestinian capabilities increased remarkably during 2019–21, so that Israel now falls within the range of these missiles, especially as the Iron Dome failed to intercept all the missiles fired at Israel. Therefore, in any future war, the whole of Israel will be under fire, possibly in ways fiercer than was witnessed during the 2014 war on the Gaza Strip.

Second, the duration of wars has changed with the demise of conventional warfare and its promise of a rapid response. There are no classical armies to surround and then eradicate. Any new war rages for a long time and impacts all of Israel. When large Israeli cities are struck by several rockets per day, this humiliating failure will cripple life and send Israelis to the bunkers.

I next outline the most important strategies that Israel has developed to maintain absolute control over Gaza.

One: Preventing Palestinian Technical Development

The dependence of the Palestinian infrastructure on Israel's infrastructure, whether that entail the internet, landlines, or cellular communications, has given Israel as an occupying power enormous monitoring capabilities. This infrastructure can be used not only to circulate propaganda, but also to spy on occupied Palestinians by controlling radio frequencies, as is evident by the Israeli army's ability to hack, disrupt, and cut off radio air waves. Israel uses these capabilities to communicate with residents of Gaza and send SMS messages to them during its military operations, which it has done during every aggression, including the attack in May 2021.

Israel increasingly subjects Palestinian cyberspace to surveillance, with Israeli forces citing Facebook posts and tweets as reasons to arrest

individuals. Monitoring individuals—whether journalists, activists, opposition figures, or critics—has led to arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The NSO Group is the most sought-after Israeli company worldwide in the field of spyware.[8] It enjoys support from the US and Europe as well as the immunity to preserve its technological superiority, free from accountability and punishment.[9] This also illustrates how Israeli companies export military surveillance technologies to other countries that violate human rights.[10]

In 1994, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) adopted Resolution 32, which calls on concerned countries to provide the necessary technical assistance to the Palestinian people to develop their communication capabilities as a "sovereign right." In 2017, it issued Resolution 9, reiterating the same point. In 2018, ITU confirmed in Resolution 125 that its aid was insufficient and did not achieve the desired goals "due to the current conditions," a mild reference to Israeli obstacles. In 2019, the union adopted Resolution 12, reaffirming its determination to help the Palestinian people modernize internet technology, including upgrading it on the West Bank from 3G to 4G and 5G, and from 2G to 4G in the Gaza Strip. The joint technical committee called on the concerned authorities (Israel) to facilitate the implementation of this resolution. So far, nothing noteworthy has happened, and the Israeli occupation still arrogantly disregards those legal considerations.[11]

While Israel uses 5G technology and prepares for 6G, Israeli restrictions limit people in Gaza to 2G. That hinders productivity and prevents technical development, not only in the field of telecommunications but also in any modern field connected with the internet, including e-man-agement in public offices, education, and other services. The need for technology has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced students to learn online using smartphones and computers. The lack of electricity and bandwidth denied students their right to learn. Israeli impunity became more evident in May 2021, when Israel systematically targeted basic internet infrastructure and high-rise buildings, apparently in an attempt to

damage the internet connection and create a media blackout.[12] This has paralyzed Palestinians from meeting the demands of education, health, and other services, ensuring that Palestine remains under the permanent control of Israel.

Two: Surveilling through Facial Recognition Technology

Facial recognition is a computer application that can identify or verify the identity of an individual through a system that compares a digital image or a video frame of that person to other images in a computer database. When the features match, the system identifies the person. Initially, these technologies were only used by high-level security services and military facilities, but they are now used at civil levels. Many Israeli companies produce facial recognition software and applications that rely on biometric mechanisms. The most famous start-up is AnyVision, in which Microsoft invests.[13] In 2019, Microsoft was criticized by international human rights and civil society organizations for funding AnyVision, which provides facial recognition technologies to the Israeli military to monitor Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.[14] AI tools also made it easy for Israel to prosecute activists and follow their movements inside Palestine and around the world through facial recognition, iris scans, and voice prints. Israeli smart devices identify the whereabouts and movements of Palestinian activists, constituting an invasion of their individual privacy and creating a negative security impact by restricting their movement and their activism in defending the rights of the Palestinian people.

Facial recognition technology allows the Israeli occupation to carry out extensive surveillance, which further violates Palestinians' right to privacy and undermines their right to freedom of expression and their ability to demand respect for their human rights. Mass surveillance also violates the basic principle of "the presumption of innocence." As Israel simultaneously grows into a global leader in advanced technology, it operationalizes this

technology as a tool to monitor people, including in the peripheral areas between Gaza and Israel, where AnyVision's "Better Tomorrow" program is used. This software tracks people who appear in live videos and human targets across different surveillance cameras. The Israeli military depends on this application in the West Bank and on the periphery of the Gaza Strip.

Three: Suppressing through Drone Technology

The sun rises and sets. The moon appears and disappears. People sleep and wake up. But "it" is always there. It is annoying. It is an ill omen. This could be a weird riddle, but Palestinians in Gaza know it by heart. If I raise my face to the sky, I do not see birds or clouds. The first thing that catches my attention is the *zannana* (something that buzzes) or "the crow of the sky," as it is known in Gaza. To Palestinians, Israeli drones represent the most horrific use of technology in the modern era. We have many sleepless nights because of the annoying noise of drones in the sky above Gaza. Their loud sound, like an electric generator, accompanies us at every moment and everywhere. Sometimes you feel as if it will enter through the window because of its proximity and loud noise. The drones are the source of nonstop psychological pressure, constant tension, and mind-wandering, which hinders students' concentration and academic achievement. The drones are evidence that, legally, Israel still occupies the Gaza Strip, even though it has withdrawn its soldiers and settlers.

The American research institute Frost & Sullivan reports that Israel is the largest exporter of unmanned systems in the world. Drone exports constitute 10 percent of Israeli security exports. Israel produces two types of large drones: the Eitan, which has a wingspan of 26 meters, and the Hermes 450, capable of carrying missiles.[15] The real danger of these missile-loaded death drones is that the Israeli army uses them in assassination operations in the Gaza Strip. Human rights organizations report that the many Israeli drone attacks in which people are assassinated extrajudicially could constitute crimes against humanity. Human Rights

Watch reported that drone attacks against Palestinian civilians during Israel's Operation Cast Lead (2008–9) killed twenty-nine civilians, including eight children.[16] The Palestinian Center for Human Rights reported that 825 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were killed in Gaza by Israeli drones between 2006 and 2011. Further, the Israeli occupation army used drones to drop tear gas canisters on Palestinian protesters during the 2018 Great Return March along Gaza's periphery in order to obstruct the protests and break the protesters' will.

Four: Employing Digital Siege and Isolating Gaza Using Military Robots and Sensor Techniques

Upon finishing the underground concrete wall that rings the Gaza periphery, the Israeli army announced a new project that would rely on robots to protect the periphery. It entailed building a technological wall as a new smart and lethal "border," at a distance of five to ten kilometers inside Gaza's periphery. In 2017, Israel introduced these robots, including the ANDROS, which is designed to penetrate tunnels; the Haroni, which monitors and photographs weapons inside the tunnels; and the SandCat, designed to defuse heavy landmines. Israel also developed a new attack sniper robot. Recently, Israel has been developing additional technology through the iDetecT4ALL project, which has received 2.3 million euros in funding from the European Union. This aims to develop optical sensing technologies around Gaza's periphery to detect and verify infiltration by detecting "the presence of objects inside or in the surrounding area of restricted critical infrastructures."[17]

This system includes advanced radar and monitoring and control systems whose range can cover the entire Gaza Strip. They communicate directly with intelligent hovercraft that receive instructions from surveillance systems and can carry out attacks against specific targets. The system includes a battalion divided into a military robot brigade, an interception brigade, and a reserve brigade. They all function without a

human element, can be activated from a distance, and are connected to the army command center, which surveys events on Gaza's periphery. Israel aims to increase its capability to close the circle around any incident on Gaza's periphery and reduce endangering the lives of its soldiers as part of using unmanned combative means (military robots). Refusing to settle on the progress made thus far, Israel is unwaveringly committed to keeping Palestinians under surveillance, and is ready to engage with any individual who attempts to come close to the periphery.

Five: Combating Palestinian Cyberspace

As part of the continuous Israeli effort to target the Palestinian presence and uproot it from its land, Palestinian online content is subjected to discrimination through strong pressure from Zionist institutions and companies that run social media platforms. Unit 8200, a special unit in the Israeli army, monitors all activities, opinions, and stances adopted by Palestinians or their allies in solidarity, and launches arrest campaigns for trivial reasons—for instance, for posting a picture of a martyr or a prisoner online or for denouncing Israeli practices as violations of the rights of the Palestinian people. Social media platforms cooperate with the Israeli Cyber Unit, as shown by the fact that they have fulfilled 95 percent of requests to delete content.[18] Social media companies and platforms use AI and algorithms to suspend users and prevent them from communicating with the outside world when they use certain words or phrases that support the Palestinian cause or denounce Israel's occupation crimes. This further isolates the besieged people of Gaza.

Israel also combats and demonizes the Palestinian narrative, linking it to terrorism through restrictions and complications regarding Palestinian digital content. These efforts have recently intensified, through AI techniques, in the deletion of content and/or the temporary or permanent suspension of accounts under the pretext that they violated the community standards of publishing on those platforms. I call this the "Cyber Dome,"

which operates similarly to the Iron Dome by reporting pro-Palestine content to be censored by social media giants.

While the world is heading toward developing legal guidelines for the ethical use of AI, Palestinians are discriminated against as Israel's hegemony is consolidated by Amazon, Google, and Facebook, beyond its domination through Israeli-made spyware and military AI technologies. These companies have whitewashed Israel's image and enabled its repressive policies and premeditated oppression of Palestinians, despite all sustained efforts to pressure these companies to withdraw their investments from Israel. A search of investments in Israel by giant technology companies such as Google and Microsoft exposes the extent of their investment. For example, in 2020 Microsoft established a new center in Israel to secretly develop electronic chips.[19] In addition, Google plans to establish a regional data center in Israel for cloud computing services where companies can invest hundreds of millions of dollars in local infrastructure.[20] Meanwhile, in April 2021, the Israeli far-right government awarded a contract worth $1.2 billion to Google and Amazon to build a cloud computing hub called Project Nimbus. Through these generous, unconditional investments, such companies ignore Israel's history as the largest center of government-sanctioned hacking and spyware in the region, increase Israel's tax revenues, and reinforce the Israeli narrative that helps Israel maintain its occupation, expand settlements, systematically oppress, impoverish, and mistreat Palestinians, and maintain its control and siege on the Gaza Strip.

Deep learning technology is also exploited to analyze big data, which programmers then use to create software that can determine the living conditions of Palestinians. Data-based computer algorithms represent the essence of AI, which is expected to be objective and fair but is actually the opposite. AI algorithms rely heavily on the available information and data provided by technicians and specialists, which are often biased in favor of the Israeli occupation. Because of the restrictions imposed on Palestinian cyberspace, which limit the spread of the Palestinian narrative, these

applications were built on data riddled with lies and racism against the besieged Palestinians, which in turn contributes to their suffering. A prime example is the 2021 protests in Jerusalem, waged by young people who objected to Israeli policies that curtailed their freedom to worship during the month of Ramadan. Foreign media reported on the “riots” caused by these young people, who were then subsequently presented as vandals breaking the law. This seriously distorts the image of the Palestinian struggle and provides an example of how Palestinians are exposed to bias by AI algorithms.

This requires the concerted efforts of local and international supporters and friends of Palestine to find technical tools to “correct” the input of algorithms, modify the wrong data extracted from an unfair society, and add correct data to challenge the stereotype of the Palestinian. What we experienced during Israel’s attack in May 2021 reveals the problem in the biased algorithms used by AI technologies against the Palestinian people. These technologies echo the practices of the giant social media companies, which “automate” the status quo that maintains the abuse, bias, and injustice against everything that supports the Palestinian people. Even online words that humanely express solidarity or support Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupier are censored. Thus, Western media highlights the Israeli narrative and its advocates. Those who understand the evolution of the Palestinian struggle and its various means are certain the virtual digital space is no longer a secondary space in the Palestinian struggle—rather, it is a real space for struggle no less effective than the one on the ground. Therefore, the calls to withdraw to platforms more tolerant toward our cause is a call to withdraw from the battle to a marginal, less effective arena, merely to save time and effort.

We need strenuous efforts to challenge the stereotypical image of the Palestinian. We need to promote the real image of the Palestinian as one who loves life and is full of hope that one day they will return to their land and homes. When they struggle to restore their right to live, Palestinians are part of the global struggle to live with dignity. As we witnessed during the May 2021 confrontation, these efforts achieved a breakthrough by

promoting this Palestinian image and shattering the walls of isolation. For the first time, Western media outlets gave space to Palestinians, despite the efforts to prevent the Palestinian voice from reaching out to the world and speaking and writing about the pain and oppression Israel inflicts daily.

Using AI to Improve the Quality of Life

In this section I discuss how deep learning, machine learning, and other related applications can help to restore Palestinian rights and overcome the technical obstacles that prevent the truth from reaching the world. To that end, I suggest the resistance should launch a blog specialized in developing AI fields in the Gaza Strip as a tool to restore rights, expose Israel's occupation, and combat discrimination against the Palestinian narrative using AI-based algorithms. This can also help protect individuals from the ruthlessness of the occupation, considering the vast Israeli technological advancement in the field of AI and of AI's bias toward Israel.

I will also shed light on the wide gap between the rapidly growing capabilities of the Israeli occupation and the significantly weaker—or almost nonexistent—capabilities on the Palestinian side.[21] Great efforts are required to bridge this chasm and develop plans and programs necessary to train and enable Palestinian activists in using AI tools to protect the Palestinian people, as well as form a new front of resistance by reducing the impact of Israel's persecution through AI tools.

What follows are some AI and other technologies that can be used in the Gaza Strip.

Using Technology to Bring War Criminals to Justice and Restore Rights, including Using Live Maps to Trace Changes on the Ground

Israel has worked hard to prevent the dissemination of accurate and high-quality images of the Palestinian territories and their surroundings. In 1997, the US government passed the Kyl-Benjamin Amendment, which

prohibited the collection or dissemination of high-resolution satellite images of Israel. The law was passed in deference to Israeli national security concerns, and, in accordance with the law, images of Israel could only have a resolution of two meters per pixel, while, globally, the accuracy reaches half a meter per pixel.

This allowed Israel to hide the catastrophic impact of the occupation. Low-resolution images frustrated efforts to identify, verify, and document human rights violations, especially in the Gaza Strip. For example, high-resolution images would have made it possible to determine the exact point from which any shot was fired at Palestinians during the Great Return March. They also would have made it possible to monitor on-the-ground changes like the building of settlement and military outposts in the West Bank or around the Gaza Strip, a type of monitoring that is difficult without high-resolution imagery.

Fortunately, in response to the emergence of competitive foreign companies that provide accurate images of the region, as well as other external pressures, the bans on accurate and high-quality aerial photography of the occupied Palestinian territory were lifted in December 2020. Thanks to the new global open sky policy, images are now available in high resolution, and it is now possible to identify and monitor changes and rights violations on the ground.[22]

This change has directly helped human rights and other specialized agencies. An example is Forensic Architecture, which uses architectural techniques and technologies to investigate state violence and violations of human rights worldwide by building digital and physical models, 3D animations, and virtual reality to investigate violent acts. Forensic Architecture documented environmental destruction during the waves of Israeli aggression on Gaza in May 2021.[23] In the processing, organizing, and analyzing of data, certain modern technologies can also help by saving investigators the significant time they would otherwise spend sorting and viewing terabytes of videos and photos. This can be seen, for example, in the way European authorities and human rights institutions rely on AI and

machine learning techniques to hold perpetrators of war crimes in Syria accountable. Algorithms produce a huge body of incriminating evidence, which can be analyzed to create a technical model for the investigation.[24]

In Palestine, and particularly in the Gaza Strip, we can use a similar model to bring Israeli war criminals to justice. AI technologies and algorithms can process the vast amount of content that documents Israeli crimes, such as Israel's use of internationally banned weapons and practices. AI's algorithms can collect several videos of the same incident, delete repeated and irrelevant footage, and match those with eyewitness accounts. They can also identify and find all related data about a certain violation. AI can enable virtual simulation techniques that highlight the suffering resulting from Israeli occupation policies. Advanced techniques can analyze evidence, including shadow angles and plumes of smoke in video clips, to determine the time and location of an attack. In violation of international law, Israel has failed to conduct independent investigations into crimes committed in the Gaza Strip, so these AI-supported modern techniques can provide compelling evidence for independent, impartial, and conclusive investigations that criminalize Israel's occupation and reinforce the rightful claims of Palestinians to their land. This will contribute to the cause of liberation from injustice and promote restoring rights to the victims and their families, who will have the right to resort to a fair trial in the courts and bring to justice the occupation and all those suspected of committing war crimes, including the political and military leadership.

Live Maps to Rekindle the Passion of Palestinians in the Refugee Camps and Diaspora

AI tools (in particular, big data tools) can be used to strengthen the connection of Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank, and the diaspora to the cities and villages from which their parents and grandparents were displaced. They can familiarize each refugee with his or her land and home and those of their relatives and neighbors. AI mapping techniques can help develop virtual software to distribute property

and rights to the returnees in preparation for the much-sought moment of return. There are currently Palestinian projects that have excelled in this field, including Palestine Open Maps, a Palestinian project that uses open-source techniques and ancient maps dating back to the nineteenth century to display Palestinian villages and cities and their original names in Arabic, and, through comparison with later maps, present the changes that took place through colonialism and occupation.[25] One feature of this project allows users to interact through their phones to produce updated knowledge and enrich the database with new and constantly updated information. This will inevitably have a role in future knowledge that will reflect the understanding of these young people about Palestine and its reality today.

A profound understanding of Palestine's history can reaffirm Palestinians' commitment to the land and villages. Technology can play a role in linking millions of Palestinians in the diaspora to the towns and villages of their ancestors and promoting the right of return, challenging Israeli attempts to obliterate this right. These technologies will provide virtual tours in Palestine for Palestinians who cannot visit there because of the Israeli occupation that deprives them of their right to return. There are already new applications that serve this purpose, including Palestine VR, which features the daily lives of people living in local Palestinian communities, as they talk about the Israeli violations and the Israelization of Arab places. The user can interact with the place and observe its details in the way s/he wants and from all possible angles. The application also aims to make the materials available for seminars, conferences, and community activities, to support the Palestinian narrative against mainstream media's bias toward the Israeli narrative. Applications like Palestine VR can create tours of selected cities in Palestine and expose Israel's apartheid. They can provide the users with the ability to navigate through virtual Palestine tours and share them with their communities to raise awareness. Additionally, they can help shed light on many Israeli violations, perhaps the most significant of which are the settlements, water theft, and land grabs.

Using such modern technologies, activists are able to take accurate pictures of the cities and villages whose inhabitants were forced to flee so that Jewish settlers could enjoy the land and plunder its resources. With the help of historians, each refugee can identify the location of his/her land and view live images, which reinforces the belief that the right of return is not impossible and kindles refugees' hope of returning. The grandchildren and children of the Nakba generation can be linked to their beautiful homeland when they see the green lands and the perennial olive, lemon, and orange trees. Even as they live a life of misery and pain inside the open-air prison of the Gaza Strip, they, too, can see the seashore of Jaffa, Haifa, and the beauty of Acre.

What distinguishes these technological projects is that Palestinians, who have experienced suffering since their birth, can expose the violations taking place on the ground. In other words, the Palestinians residing in Palestine can have agency by offering an image of Palestine to the displaced who are unable to visit their homeland. This could appeal directly to the new generations, especially the fourth generation, who were born and grew up outside Palestine, and may not understand what it means to have a homeland waiting for you to return to. Thus, they can integrate with the diaspora, without melting into it.

Colorizing Technology to Modernize Old Pictures of Palestine

Through AI techniques, old and archived pictures can be colorized. Developers insert a large set of colored pictures into a neural AI network that functions like a human brain. Over time, the program learns to recognize different objects and determine their possible original colors to produce colorful images with high quality. For example, we could start a platform titled "Incredible Pictures Israel Does Not Want You to See." It would have historical photos colorized and improved through AI techniques to show ancient Palestine and its indigenous inhabitants, proving that Palestinians are deeply rooted in their land. The pictures would reveal that Palestine was Palestinian in every way, from fashion to lifestyles and names

of places. This is what Israel is trying to erase, so that Palestine remains a land without a people for a people without a land.

The strategy of restoring historical photos aims to build up a huge digital archive of Palestinian social history and use the photos to tell a long narrative, creating a network to link Palestinians all over the world to their homeland, emphasizing the right to the land, and documenting Zionist crimes. Modern digital technologies can summarize and categorize the data into useful information and transform it into knowledge about historical patterns and future trends, in support of opening the way for liberation and salvation from the racist occupier.

Local Companies' Role in Developing AI Tools

When only exploitative companies own modern technologies that can be abused by a repressive occupier, they will cause harm to marginalized communities such as the Palestinians. Thus, experts recommend AI tools be designed locally. Such tools should be guided by the local context and be sensitive to it. Software developers should design and evaluate tools based on local needs and by developing the infrastructure available through deep local partnerships that include the users, regulators, and actors in the technology field in the region. We can seek Arab partnerships that support and advocate for the Palestinian narrative via technological means to achieve justice and equity for Palestinians. These technologies have the potential to make life in Gaza better in many ways.

AI systems are meant to benefit all, and they are accurate, efficient, and capable of being generalized. But there is a risk of social biases and prejudices being incorporated into the AI programs used by Israel against the Palestinians. Israel relies primarily on data that already reflects those biases or may reflect the biases inherent in the designers and programmers. In both cases, the result is that already vulnerable or excluded groups, like those in the Gaza Strip, are further marginalized. We cannot talk about developing AI technologies in the Gaza Strip for humanitarian purposes without the participation of aid organizations, civil society, charities, and

the Palestinian government. Technology investors should also participate in these discussions. In other words, the active participation of Gaza's researchers in studies to support the development of regulations governing the design of AI techniques is a prerequisite for their fair use. The current Palestinian technological "reforms" are insufficient, and hence the existing systems fail.

Using 3D Printers to Break the Siege on Equipment

By using a range of materials such as polymers, metals, and ceramics that may be available in Gaza, 3D models can be made with the help of computer design programs. 3D printers have become cheaper and more widespread in workplaces and homes, providing many applications and benefits. This opens up the possibility for revolutionizing the manufacturing and logistics sector and turning 3D printing into an important tool to relieve the siege on the Gaza Strip.

The use of 3D printing today is not limited to construction tools, equipment, spare parts, medical equipment, prosthetic limbs, and bones. It is also used to produce tissues, skin, and organs such as the heart. Working to make 3D printers succeed in the Gaza Strip will play a prominent role in supporting the citizens, particularly Palestinians who have lost limbs in Israeli onslaughts. For example, during the Great Return March snipers deliberately targeted protesters, which resulted in more than a thousand Palestinians becoming amputees. 3D printing will substantially benefit local manufacturers, enabling them to create customizable products, reduce production time, and improve quality. In addition, because the products that are printed are typically recyclable, 3D printing can promote sustainability by using less material more efficiently, a valuable benefit in the medical, industrial, and relief sectors.

AI to Assist Palestinian Physicians

According to *Forbes* magazine, medical diagnoses using AI contribute to reducing hospital stays by 50 percent. AI thus can be economically

profitable by helping to manage hospital bed capacity, which is vital given the few hospitals that operate in Gaza.[26] AI has achieved remarkable progress in detecting diseases in their early stages and, in general, has a positive impact on patient health. As the Gaza Strip is almost permanently closed to travel, patients cannot easily access treatment outside. Even the Rafah Crossing to Sinai is not always open, thus patients cannot access medical care in Egypt or Europe. The quality of treatment can be exacerbated by the severe shortage of medicines or the delay in diagnosing cases, or both. Hence, decision-makers should pressure international bodies to provide technologies that are available elsewhere. This will save time, significantly improve the lives of Gaza's patients, and alleviate their suffering, especially given the reality of overcrowded hospitals that lack enough beds.

Keeping Up with the Latest Technologies Is What Gaza Does

Every day, we read news about technology and new impressive uses of AI. As Palestinians, we have the right to use such technologies to help break the state of siege imposed by Israel. An interesting example of such an innovation is the nanotechnology that enables spinach to send emails. Through nanotechnology, engineers at MIT transformed spinach into sensors capable of detecting explosive materials as well as the presence of nitro-aromatics in groundwater, a compound found in explosives.[27] The engineers used the signals emitted by carbon nanotubes in spinach leaves by installing an advanced infrared camera that reads and analyzes the signals, and then sends an email alert to the relevant authorities. In Gaza, we have lost loved ones because of unexploded Israeli ordnance buried in the soil. Given the urgent need to reduce the number of casualties, I believe we can benefit from this technology if we implement something similar.

Modern technologies can improve the lives of Gazans. Gaza is an area where there is no place for logic and where destruction is the reality. How can a small area besieged by land, air, sea, and even cyberspace, and whose

movement of people and goods is completely restricted, survive and endure? We acknowledge our shortcomings as Palestinians in effectively harnessing all the means of technology to protect our rights. However, we are always confronted with the elaborately fabricated Israeli narrative, whose effective use of technology enables it to reach wider audiences. We therefore must resort to new international laws that can limit the Israeli cyber occupation by reducing the bias in algorithms through intensive coordination, starting with the Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2019. This bill, introduced in the US House of Representatives in April 2019, seeks to regulate bias and requires commercial entities to monitor high-risk systems that involve personal information or make automated decisions—such as systems that use AI or machine learning—specifically to assess those systems for bias and discrimination.

Perhaps the Artificial Intelligence Act, proposed by the European Commission in April 2021 and at this writing still under EU consideration, is the long-awaited set of regulations that might harmonize artificial intelligence usage, place restrictions on mass surveillance and the use of AI to manipulate people's lives, and prosecute companies that use or sell biased algorithms.[28] I think Palestinians need to seize this golden opportunity. We need to enhance the Palestinian voice calling out the Israeli restrictions and the racism that the major companies subject us to. I believe these proposed new laws reflect a major positive global shift toward regulating the unfair and harmful practices of AI, whose use has spread without limits or oversight to protect human freedoms. If we are not able to dramatically change the global technology policies that are unfair to marginalized people, at least, for the time being, we can actively enhance the EU's control policies. We can report the suffering and pain to which the defenseless Palestinians are exposed as Israel uses AI—the world's smartest weapon—to violate our rights.

AI as a Catalyst for Liberation

Technological development and emerging capabilities in the field of information are the most significant manifestations of the progress and strength of countries in the era of the information revolution. We can bridge the gap and use it as a catalyst for complete liberation, the fulfillment of the right of return, and the restoration of our inalienable rights. The strength of countries is no longer measured only by military and economic power, but also by technology and information technology. They have become strategic forces that determine victory or defeat in wartime.

The use of AI complements other efforts through which Palestinians spread awareness about their cause. We need to educate internet users about cyberspace in order to convey the Palestinian message to the world as quickly as possible, using serious, objective, honest, and accurate tools of influence produced by modern technologies to preserve our cultural heritage and highlight Palestine's Arab identity. For example, Palestinians and friends of Palestine must work diligently to solve the problem of racial bias against the Palestinian cause by training qualified AI teams in how to expose algorithms to balanced sets of objective data that champion and support Palestine.

It is not enough to let the world know the truth—the world already knows the truth. We need to make the world take action, and we need to empower Palestinians and develop their ability to challenge the Israeli occupation in effective ways. Developing AI techniques to help break the imposed siege requires a strong commitment by government, in coordination with civil society institutions, companies, and interested individuals. We need to study the availability of human cadre and infrastructure, set priorities for the next stage, devise feasible plans, and provide both theoretical and practical solutions to issues that affect society. Furthermore, we need to create job opportunities and enhance performance and productivity for vulnerable groups, including youth, women, and people disabled by repeated wars. We must communicate with the outside world and establish effective partnerships with leading academic and scientific institutions in order to enhance scientific cooperation, expand the horizons of technological innovation, serve educational and technical

scientific development in all fields, participate in scientific conferences, and study emerging AI techniques and innovative practices to use them in education and telemedicine.

I also recommend establishing specialized research centers to study the possibility of employing AI for environmental issues like monitoring water pollution and energy so that we can adopt appropriate measures to reduce waste. Additionally, AI may be an important field for future students and researchers to create radical and creative solutions to intractable environmental, economic, and technical problems. This will contribute to improving the quality of life and enhance the ability of Palestinian society to not only remain resilient but also continue the struggle for and defense of their rights until they fulfill the right of return.

Decision-makers and relevant authorities must formulate a national strategy and form an executive structure to implement this strategy. This requires a plan that fully and effectively empowers the capabilities of AI in various educational and economic environments and sectors based on research, training, and development in accord with best practices. Priorities should be determined keeping in mind the technologies Israel has developed. We should focus on producing competencies in the fields of AI and machine learning to collect and process data, evaluate applications, and predict the scenarios and necessary means to succeed in confronting the Israeli occupation and enable the Gaza Strip to compete in the field. And there is an urgent need to reform social media platforms' algorithmic bias against Palestinians and end the pervasive stereotyping and delegitimizing of the just Palestinian cause.

Palestinians are at a critical stage. AI is developing swiftly, yet its ability to promote civil liberties and independence has barely begun. Meanwhile, Israel continues its control and occupation through modern tools. Palestinian specialists in AI must exploit its technologies and develop creatively at the global, regional, local, and organizational levels to ensure that we do not fall behind. AI is a powerful tool, if only the difficulty of acquiring it, as so many face today, could be surmounted. It must be carefully developed and organized in a way that limits Israel's abuses. It

should be used to empower Palestinian society and help us to gain our freedom as soon as possible.

A Palestinian man is holding a book amidst the ruins of the Samir Mansour bookstore that Israeli bombardment destroyed in the 2021 attack on Gaza. May 18, 2021. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Exporting Oranges and Short Stories: Cultural Struggle in the Gaza Strip

Mosab Abu Toha

On August 2, 2014, Israeli aircraft struck the administration building of the Islamic University of Gaza. The Israeli army said it had targeted a "weapons development" center on the campus. Hundreds of English language and literature books lay under the rubble of the English Department. American novels, poetry anthologies, plays, and books of literary criticism were shredded and strewn around. Hundreds of exam papers, including mine, were pierced by shrapnel and concrete. As a student, all I thought about were the faces of Whitman, Eliot, Huxley, Dickinson, Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Poe, and Plath, among others, buried under the rubble. Wasn't it enough for Plath and Hemingway to have committed suicide in the past century? Had they known, I thought, Ernest wouldn't have shot himself with a shotgun: an F-16 would be more effective. Sylvia wouldn't have stuck her head in the oven: the heat of the explosion would burn her more efficiently. After all, their deaths in Gaza would've been paid for by the US government: it made or donated most of those aircrafts and bombs, funded by taxes that Hemingway's and Plath's families no doubt still pay.

In the few hours of silence after the bombings, I rushed toward my university. The building, bombed and in ruins, was not safe to enter but I risked it and walked carefully through the rubble. One of the first things I saw shook me deeply—books buried under tons of concrete and dust. I had never imagined that books could be harmed so ruthlessly.

As I stepped closer to where the English Department had been located, I found a copy of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, partly torn and covered with dust. I cleaned it. I embraced it. I'm not ashamed to say that I cried about my lifeline to American literature that had survived. Later, I discovered it was the same book one of my instructors had used while lecturing. When I returned home that afternoon, the electricity was off. I used a friend's phone, which had internet. It was extremely slow but it was my best option.

I logged into my Facebook account and posted the photo with that book and then another photo of my badly damaged book collection. Just a few days before the attack on my university, our house was partially destroyed after an F-16 bomb turned our neighbor's house into a pile of concrete. We were lucky we had left our house twenty hours before the explosion.

When the war ended, old friends and strangers from around the world responded to the photos. Within a short period, emails and messages pledging to send books filled my inbox. A few months later, the idea occurred to me to create a public English-language library that everyone in Gaza could use.

Everything we in Gaza had experienced—being bombed frequently and regularly cut off from electricity, but also deliberately deprived of culture through a shortage of libraries, library books, and access to vital informational resources abroad—made me a man of action. I no longer saw myself as just a Palestinian student of British and American literature, but as a librarian-in-the-making, determined to create a new library, an English-language library—something that did not exist in Gaza.

I knew I had to push ahead and turn the destruction of our university into something positive. I knew that with the help of friends from abroad and my friends in Gaza, I could build a public library. And the book parcels kept coming in—each one opening new worlds in one of the biggest open-air prisons on earth.

Significance

What is Gaza? Who are her people, their aspirations? Most people know little about us and perhaps understand even less. Gaza appears in the global mind, momentarily, when it is attacked by Israel or declared unlivable by the UN. When people think of Gaza, they think of harshness, suffering, poverty, militancy. Since Israel's horrific assault in May 2021, we've also been viewed through the lens of destruction. We remain unseen and nameless save for the violence and devastation inflicted upon us.

Yet, there is another side—in fact, many sides—to who we are, how we live, and what we aspire to that is not seen in media and popular representations but is far more defining: a vibrant cultural life that is present and persistent, that speaks to the power and agency in Gaza, and that is more often than not overlooked. In this chapter, I will make visible that which has been made invisible, revealing a Gaza seldom observed. I will reveal the cultural and engaged side of Gaza, and the struggles we encounter in making it so. And I must add another fact that remains unknown, even concealed: the linkage between Gaza's past as a historical center of Palestinian cultural life and her present, where culture—learning, art, music, literature, theater—is tied to and shaped by our heritage.

Of Books and Libraries

On March 23, 2016, I looked for the email address of Professor Noam Chomsky, whom I had met in 2012 during his brief visit to Gaza. I had hidden his address, which he penned for me, in the first book I ever received, the *Oxford Dictionary.* A friend from the United Kingdom sent it to me in 2011, when I was a college freshman. I hadn't known it would have many, many siblings in Gaza later on. I turned on my laptop, running on a low battery as usual, and wrote this email to Professor Chomsky:

> Good morning Prof. Chomsky. This is Mosab from Gaza-Palestine. I met you in 2012 when you visited Gaza and the Islamic University of Gaza. I will be grateful if you can send me some of your books that you would recommend to a young Palestinian writer. Here is a photo of you and

me at the conference hall where you delivered your speech, and a photo of my bombed university.

I don't know how I called myself a writer at the time. I had nothing on my profile as a writer. I used to write posts on Facebook. That's all. Well, yes, I was a writer in the literal meaning of the word.

Just three hours later, Professor Chomsky replied:

Pleased to hear from you, and thanks for the photo. It was a memorable visit. If you let me know how I can send books, and what kind of books you might be interested in, I will do what I can. I hope you are well.
Noam Chomsky

I thought to myself, *If Professor Chomsky is asking about how he can send books to me, then it means that I am the first person in Gaza to receive books from him.*

I sent him an email with some titles and wrote:

I already have two of your books which are "The Fateful Triangle" and "Deterring Democracy."
You can send the other books via Amazon or via the US Postal Service. I prefer to have your signature on the books. It will be my everlasting honor.
The address is:
Gaza Palestine
PO Box 108
00972

One of Professor Chomsky's assistants responded that they had three of the listed books and assured me that the books would be signed.

In the United States, when mailing a book, you put your name, street address, city, state, and zip code on the package. But no such system like that exists in Gaza. The address I used was for my university. The university would call me to pick up the package when it arrived. I would then take a taxi to the university.

The Edward Said Public Library

Over the following months the number of books in my room grew. I created a Facebook page, "Library and Bookshop for Gaza." Readers worldwide

responded to the campaign by donating books and sharing my plea. When the books I collected had exceeded six hundred, I invited my Facebook friends to donate money so I could rent a place for the books and buy bookshelves, desks, and chairs.

To express the respect and gratitude that we Palestinians have for Edward W. Said and his bridge-building across the world, I named the library in honor of this great Palestinian American writer and academic—an important symbol of freedom and intellectual life in Palestine. Said spent his life advocating for Palestinian equality by teaching, writing many articles and books, and reaching out to anyone who was willing to listen and learn—goals that we have for our Edward Said Library.

In the summer of 2017, with the assistance of my friend Shadi Salem, I rented two tiny rooms for the library in a small apartment in the city of Beit Lahia, in the north of the Gaza Strip. Early in 2018, the library moved to a bigger apartment in the same city, where it still operates. The library now includes a big reading room, a children's room, an arts room, and a lecture room. In the May 2021 aggression, several windows in the library were shattered. The day after the cease-fire, I visited the library. I found shards of glass resting on books that had fallen off the shelves. Some tiles were also cracked from the heavy bombardment. Dust covered every inch of the library.

I felt honored when Mrs. Mariam Said, Edward's widow, expressed her gratitude upon learning about our efforts to establish the library. She donated money and a few of Edward's books to us—all signed "Gift from the Said Family."

In late 2018, because the library lacked a legal status (due to the political rift between the Hamas-run government in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, which makes it extremely difficult for any Gazan organization to obtain a license), Mrs. Said connected me with the Middle East Children's Alliance, a nonprofit that now functions as the US sponsor and partner of the Edward Said Library. On September 25, 2019, the

sixteenth anniversary of Edward Said's death, a second branch of the library opened in Gaza City.

Both libraries offer not only a venue for reading and borrowing books, but also a reading club, English club, English language lessons, music and drawing sessions, computer lessons in a lab, and a children's corner. The libraries' activities run year-round. Many school students visit the libraries as part of their school activities. Students also use them to look up references for their school research projects.

An additional problem that librarians, teachers, and counselors face in Gaza is the lack of new publications, which could help children and young people develop their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional abilities. Only two libraries specialize in children's books and activities: Palestinian Child Library, run by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and the Al-Qattan Child Centre library.[1]

In the aftermath of the frequent bombings in Gaza, many depressed and traumatized children come to the Edward Said libraries to seek psychological support from the staff. The two libraries care as much as possible for these children. As part of the evolving counseling and recovery program, the staff play games with children in the library, while other children prefer to draw and play with colors.

Children comprise half of Gaza's population. They have not only witnessed the destruction around them and live in fear with every falling bomb, but also have lost family and friends and suffered injuries. Some live in UNRWA schools that have been turned into shelters because their homes were severely damaged or destroyed. Maybe the hardest part during any attack on Gaza is the powerlessness of parents to protect their children. Once, my four-year-old daughter, Yaffa, scared by the sound of a falling bomb, whispered to me, "Daddy, it's a bomb. I want to hide." Her five-and-a-half-year-old brother, Yazzan, brought her a blanket and told her, "You can hide now." They both slept next to me in the middle of our house, considered the safest place during a bombing. After the cease-fire, children began to visit the library, inaccessible for the previous eleven days. Library

staff, with me present, brought gifts and new games for the children. New colors, puzzles, and stories were waiting for them on tables when they came. A few days later, we organized a fun day in a garden close to the library, where the children danced to music, played group games, drew in the open, and were entertained by clowns.

Checkpoints Are Also for Books

In April 2016, Professor Chomsky again sent a dozen of his books. However, the Israeli authorities had stopped all mail to Gaza. They claimed that armed groups were getting materials that could be used for military purposes. I didn't think that the draconian Israeli ban would apply to books for children, linguists, and anyone interested in literature, but I was wrong. That confirmed to me that Israel was waging a deliberate and systematic attack on Palestinian learning by depriving the people of knowledge.

Professor Chomsky's books were held up by the Israeli authorities from July 2016 until January 2017. Six months passed before the books arrived in Gaza. Additionally, several boxes of books from various donors never made it to Gaza. This is but one example of the difficulties of building a library in an occupied country.

In addition, while under Israeli control, books would sometimes be left out in the open, unprotected from harm. If they did arrive, they frequently came in such poor condition that I would feel sad for my little friends, those books from abroad—but at least they made it to Gaza, however badly damaged.

In a normal situation in Gaza—something that people in the US would never call "normal"—packages that should only take ten business days would arrive after a seven-, eight-, or nine-week delay. I would sometimes track them and discover that they arrived in Israel a week after being shipped from the US but were held in Israel, hopefully in peace, for weeks.

Many times, the mailing company's agent in Israel or the West Bank would call to tell me that they couldn't deliver the parcel to Gaza, and that I

needed to send an individual to pick up the package in the West Bank. That's like asking the head of an American library to travel through Mexico to pick up a parcel in Guatemala, because Israel is a foreign country that does not allow Gazans to leave or travel except in very rare situations.

One striking example: in December 2017, a donor from Canada sent a shipment of fifty novels via FedEx. Gaza was listed as the final destination of the parcel. After it arrived in the West Bank, I got a message from the Palestinian subcontractor of the American multinational courier delivery service, saying: "You need to pay 700 dollars, and someone needs to come and pick up the books for you in the West Bank." The books were a donation, and I wasn't allowed to travel to the West Bank.

I was stunned—another of the many Kafkaesque moments in Palestine. Desperate, I called the donor, who told me the books and their shipment had already cost him 1,200 Canadian dollars. I then asked the Palestinian subcontractor what would happen to the books if I was unable to pay the money or pick them up from the West Bank. He told me point-blank that they would simply destroy the books. We never received our books from Canada.

Last year, I called the donor. He told me that he eventually got half of his books back.

It is possible that our attempt at making world literature available to Palestinians and giving them a chance to think globally might have caused the Israeli government to hold back our books; every book that enters Gaza must pass through Israel and its censors.

Public Libraries in Gaza

In 1943, Arif al-Arif, a renowned Palestinian historian, stated in his encyclopedic book *The History of Gaza* that there were four Arabic libraries in Gaza: one in the Omari Grand Mosque, another in the Community Sports Club, a third in the boy's school, and the fourth in the girl's school. He added that the governor's house contained an English library. The largest

collection was in the Omari Mosque, which was founded in 1933 and had 2,500 books and manuscripts. Al-Arif also wrote that there were two bookshops in Gaza.[2]

Recently, the Palestinian News and Information Agency (PNIA), the news agency of the Palestinian Authority, provided a list of fifty-six libraries in Gaza, without including information about these libraries.[3] In 2015, the Palestine Museum, an independent institution dedicated to supporting an open and dynamic Palestinian culture, conducted a survey on public libraries in Palestine. The survey revealed that "a majority of Palestine's libraries are located in the Gaza Strip." This indicates to me the vitality of culture and education in Gaza. Nearly 70 percent of the population are refugees or their descendants. Mostly educated and with university degrees, these refugees created, almost from nothing, spaces for themselves and their community to grow and build, to create a country at least in their minds before they fulfill their dream: their right to return.

The largest library in the Gaza Strip is the Bani Suheila Municipality Library, which has forty thousand books.[4] However, the library has been closed to the public since 2008 because the municipality took over the library building after its own building was destroyed in the 2008–9 war. In June 2021, I phoned the municipality's office manager, Samir Abu Lebdah, who shared with me: "The library was part of the municipality's cultural center. It's been active since the 1990s, serving women, children, and students. We offered free courses and organized summer camps. However, due to the siege and lack of funding, we've been unable to employ a person to run the library and the cultural center, even after the municipality moved to its new building. Neither could we afford to pay any running costs for the library or center." Later in the call, Mr. Abu Lebdah wondered if I could in some way connect them with funding resources.

The Palestine Museum survey shows forty-one libraries in the Gaza Strip, seven of which were completely or partially destroyed, while eight libraries have been closed or are inactive. Among the reasons listed for closure or inactivity is the political rift between Hamas and Fatah since

2007. For example, the survey states that the Al-Zaitoun Sports Club Library "was managed by the Al-Zaitoun Sports Club in Al-Zaitoun neighborhood. It operated from 1982 until 2007 but was closed following the internal divisions in Gaza in 2007. The club has now been turned into a detention center, and around 6,000 books have been lost."

The Al-Atta Charitable Society Library was established in 2000 in a forty-square-meter space in the Society's building in Beit Hanoun, in the north of the Gaza Strip. In 2007, the Society was set on fire by unknown perpetrators: the fire damaged its facilities, including the library, but the headquarters was renovated in 2008. Then, during the Israeli aggression in 2014, the library was totally destroyed, but the Society rented a new building and assigned one of the rooms to serve as a small library housing the 250 books recovered from the bombed building. The library used to have three thousand children's books and four thousand books for adults, as well as a computerized system and a total membership of two hundred people.

The survey lists the oldest library as Al Maghazi Services Club Library, "established in 1951 or 1952. It covers forty square meters in Al Maghazi refugee camp and used to belong to UNRWA. The library closed down in 2007 during the internal divisions, and the club was taken over and used as a prison."

One of the first and most important libraries is located in the YMCA. "Established in 1976, this was one of Palestine's most active libraries. It was burnt down by unknown perpetrators in the year 2008 but was renovated, expanded, and re-opened in 2011," according to the Palestine Museum.

Among the still active libraries is the Diana Tamari Library, run and housed in the Rashad Al-Shawwa Cultural Center.[5] Established in 1988, its six hundred square meters house over twenty thousand books in Arabic and English.[6] The library received eight hundred visitors in 2017. Another is the Red Crescent Library, which was founded in the 1970s, when the prominent physician and diplomatic negotiator Dr. Haidar Abdel-Shafi was

the director of the Palestine Red Crescent.[7] The library received six thousand visitors in 2017. In February 2021, I contacted the Palestinian Museum to ask if they had updated information, to which they replied that nothing had been updated since they first provided the list in 2015.

I later contacted the Palestinian Ministry of Culture in Ramallah, since we don't have a ministry of culture in Gaza. They said they don't have any information about libraries, cultural centers, or other artistic spaces, as "we don't have offices in Gaza." Upon receiving my inquiry about their archive, the minister's office stated, "After Hamas took over Gaza, we couldn't get hold of any documents that were already there." For nearly fifteen years, the PA's Ministry of Culture has not collected information about libraries or cultural centers in Gaza. I urged them to do something about it. The person whom I spoke with said, "Well, I think we can email the libraries and municipalities in Gaza and send some surveys. This way, you and we can help each other." Finally, we were making progress on this issue.

Libraries, Visitors, Book Exhibits: The Current Reality

I do not think I can ever forget the photo of the little girl holding a textbook she rescued from under the rubble of her destroyed house in northern Gaza in 2014. This one photo, for me, speaks to the consistent and unabated effort to preserve learning and education despite the consistent attempts to destroy it. In the past few years, efforts at preservation have assumed different forms. Some organizations, libraries, and children's centers began to run mobile library projects. Usually, a mobile library is a van "stocked with books on a wide variety of topics and makes visits to schools in various neighborhoods to satiate the reading appetite of children."[8] This represents one of several initiatives to address the grim situation facing libraries.

Similarly, in May 2018, about sixty writers in Gaza participated in the Ramallah Book Exhibit in the West Bank. The writers themselves didn't

participate, just their books. The PA Ministry of Culture applied for permits for the writers but the Israeli authorities refused to grant them. “They even rejected to grant permits to the participating publishers,” former minister of culture Ihab Bseiso stated.[9] Fortunately, the books did not need permits to participate in the exhibit.

The following April, the Gaza Ministry of Culture and the Gaza City Municipality organized the first book exhibit in six years. Fifteen local and regional publishing houses and societies participated in the exhibit with about twenty thousand books. Most of the books came from local bookstores and had been imported from abroad. In the past, books were smuggled through tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. These days, with most tunnels destroyed and with the blockade now in its fifteenth year, books reach Gaza only in small quantities—either via mail or carried by tourists and Palestinians who are returning or visiting from abroad. Despite the efforts to preserve and expand Gaza’s inventory of books, restrictions on access and the immense economic pressures imposed on people have had a damaging impact.

For example, Abdallah Tayeh, a writer and the assistant secretary-general for the General Union of Palestinian Writers, told me about Israel’s severe restrictions on any transportation of new books and journals that are published in the West Bank. They cannot be sent to Gaza, nor are any new books from Gaza allowed entry to the West Bank. That is like telling Americans they cannot send books from New York to California or from North Dakota to Texas. In short, knowledge gets restricted by the occupiers, so much so that, because of the endless siege, a new book has become a luxury in Gaza. I often think about the impact of this on education, on the ability to think critically and creatively, and on the ability to envision a future. In an article published online, Raed Wihidi, chief librarian at the Diana Tamari Library in Gaza, shared some startling statistics: before the siege on Gaza in 2007, the library had more than twenty thousand members; today, it attracts only a quarter of that number.[10]

Furthermore, many of the visitors to public libraries are school and university students. This dramatic drop in readers shows how devastating the constant pressure is on Palestinians and on their education. Significantly, Karim Ghabin, the Dar Al-Shorouk bookstore director in Gaza, mentioned in a 2019 article published by the Nawa Network that in the past two years, the store requested its branches in Ramallah, West Bank, and Amman, Jordan, not to send more books, because "almost no one buys new books anymore."[11] People can no longer afford them. A few publishing houses have tried to support the local literary movement, but given joblessness, depression, and hopelessness, these efforts make me think of a Palestinian Sisyphus pushing a literary boulder up a high mountain.

As a writer, founder of a library, and a teacher of English, I felt like crying when I heard the devastating assessment of the situation in my country by Atef Abu Saif, a Gazan novelist and writer, who now serves as the minister of culture of the Palestinian Authority: "A healthy cultural atmosphere requires a healthy political one. We don't have this, unfortunately. The politician doesn't support the intellectual. On the contrary, he tries to fight him. Gaza deserves to be the world's cultural voice: it is the city of suffering and pain, which make poets and literary figures." Sadly, he goes on to say, "no one [is there] to support these talents"—talents that were born out of our tragedy.[12]

The occupation and siege of Gaza pose a daily challenge for everyone, including libraries and librarians, who find themselves restricted in what they can achieve. Frequent electricity cuts, extremely slow internet access, closure of border crossings for books, readers, and librarians, plus the political rift among Palestinians, and the humiliation of the population by the occupying power—whether in the sea, sky, or land—present some of the many hurdles Gazans have to daily overcome.

In December 2020, Minister Abu Saif was able to visit Gaza, where he met with the directors of some libraries, cultural centers, publishers, and

theaters. Abu Saif cannot enter Gaza unless Israel grants him a permit to do so.

Banning Books

Unfortunately, the key players in our life—Israel and the Palestinian Authority—do not tolerate critics. For example, in 1991 Edward Said, an independent member of the Palestine National Council (PNC) and an outspoken critic of Yasser Arafat, resigned from the PNC to protest how the humiliating peace process was unfolding and continued to criticize the PLO in subsequent years. As a result of Said's criticism, PLO chairman Arafat banned Said's works in Gaza and the West Bank.

Similarly, Israel, super sensitive to any criticism, especially from Palestinians, banned and confiscated 6,420 books between 1967 and 1995 in Gaza and the West Bank—the way the Catholic Church and many countries banned countless books throughout history. Today, people in Western democracies can and do create environments in which books rarely get banned—something that Palestinians can only hope for.

To quote the Norwegian library researcher Erling Bergan: "From 1967, when Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza started, and up to this day [2000], Israeli censorship has been hard. Through the years, many Israeli military orders banning specific book titles have been issued. The list reached at one-point Kafkaesque proportions, with titles like George Orwell's *1984*. [It] was on one of the sixty lists of prohibited books that included more than 1,600 titles."[13]

By banning books, the Israeli occupation deprives Palestinians of seeing beyond Gaza to the outside world and learning about that world. So, not only have Palestinians been expelled from their homes and ancestral land, not only have they been thrown into prisons, not only have their trees been cut and burned, not only have they been subject to daily killing and humiliation, not only have they been denied the right to return to their homes, but they are also denied access to knowledge and literature, besieged even inside their homes during curfews and random air raids.

They are not allowed to travel freely, even through books. If one doesn't get killed by Israel, then life must be made unbearable.

Literature in Gaza

An important part of Gaza's tradition of learning is its insistence on writing and literary production. This, too, is another way we resist . . . and persist. Palestinian cities, including Gaza, were part of Greater Syria under the Ottoman Empire. It seems that Palestinians started to see themselves as politically and geographically, and hence literarily, independent following World War I, and especially after 1948. If one tries to find Palestinian poets or prose writers before World War I, there are very few. There were historians, sociologists, theologians, and physicians. Poets, novelists, and playwrights started to emerge in the early 1920s when the Zionist project began to threaten Palestinians and their land.

In 1966, just two years after the PLO was founded, the General Union for Palestinian Writers and Journalists (later shortened to General Union for Palestinian Writers) was established in Gaza. The union then opened other offices in various countries.

With Israel's occupation of Gaza in 1967, most of the union's writers took refuge outside Gaza. Great poets like Muin Bseiso and Harun Hashim Rasheed, as well as novelist Ahmed Omar Shaheen, left for Egypt and Beirut.

Despite restrictions on freedom of expression, the art of the short fictional work attained great popularity after 1967 and proliferated throughout the Strip. Copying and transporting a work to publishing houses in Jerusalem to be printed was no easy task, so the short length of these works—a short story or novella, typically not exceeding a hundred pages—helped facilitate publication. Through the brevity and symbolism of the short work, writers found a way to overcome Israel's restrictions on printing and publishing. Gaza, it was said in Palestinian circles abroad, became "the exporter of oranges and short stories."[14]

Journalism in Gaza

As with other forms of written expression, journalism is not automatically associated with Gaza. It is true that newspapers appeared later in Gaza than in other Palestinian cities. “Gaza City was not a political center like Jerusalem during the Ottoman era, and Jaffa during the British era,” writes Muhammad Basil Suleiman. “The lawyers who played a political role, as well as political leaders from the cities of the Gaza Strip, were practicing their political activities outside Gaza City, in Jerusalem and Jaffa in particular.”[15]

The first Palestinian newspaper was *Al-Quds*, first issued in 1867 and published in both Arabic and Turkish. By 1908, there were fifteen newspapers in Palestine. By 1914, there were forty newspapers. After the Israeli occupation in 1967, “Al-Quds Newspaper was the first Palestinian newspaper to be issued with an Israeli license in Jerusalem on August 11, 1968, as a political daily newspaper.”[16]

The first print shop in Palestine was founded in 1830 in Jerusalem. There is no record of a journalism movement in Gaza. Some historians believe that the lack of investment in journalism by businessmen and other parties in Gaza was due to the absence of skills and the fact that it would take a long time to realize a return on their investment. Another reason was a belief that Gaza could not compete with the journals and magazines in Jerusalem and other big cities, which had a long history of professionalism in the field.

Newspapers appeared in Gaza only during the British Mandate. Compared with the newspapers published in Jaffa, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Bethlehem, Gaza’s newspapers were modest by the professional and technical standards of the time, and limited in circulation.

The period of Egyptian rule (1948–67) was the golden age of the press in the Gaza Strip. The number of newspapers reached nineteen, including two daily newspapers and seventeen newspapers and magazines issued weekly or monthly. Many were issued irregularly or did not last long, as

they could not overcome the difficulties they encountered, including military censorship. Nothing could be published in a newspaper or in print before the Egyptian military censor first gave his official approval.[17]

After the First Intifada broke out in 1987, there were many active magazines and journals in Gaza. The most important were *Ru'ya* (Vision) from 1999 to 2008, *Al-Sahel* (Coast) from 1997 to 2001, *Al-Ra'i* (Opinion), whose launch year is unknown but who ceased publication in 2003, and *Watani* (My Homeland) from 1995 to 2004. In addition to these, there were twelve licensed newspapers, sixteen licensed magazines, fifty-four licensed print shops (1996–2007), thirteen licensed translation centers (1996–2001), four licensed news agencies, seventeen licensed publishing and distribution houses (1995–2006), and twenty-seven licensed bookshops and stationery stores (1995–2006).[18] For the names of those periodicals and additional information, see this chapter's appendix.

Gaza's Artistic Life

The arts have long been a feature of life in Gaza and continue to be embraced despite ongoing oppression and periods of inactivity. This may come as a surprise to many, but not to Gazans. Before 1948, Palestine had a rich and varied musical heritage. Every village had its own musical taste and style, which gave birth to many unique traditional songs. But that all changed when Israel was created and its forces occupied our land. The displacement of more than seven hundred thousand Palestinians fragmented the social fabric, silencing for some time much of their cultural and musical heritage. Instruments aren't typically among the items people seize when they rush to leave their house, and living in a squalid refugee camp is not conducive to a "luxury" such as making music.

Yet, in an effort to break the stagnation, a group of five Palestinian musicians and singers—nineteen years old and younger—came together in 2012 to form Sol Band, one of the first music groups in Palestine, which

enjoys great popularity in Gaza. The Arabic word *sol* means "to wander." They play "both modern and traditional Arabic music with a style and formation which is visibly Western," earning them "tens of thousands of followers and fans on social media."[19] Sol Band also has a female member named Rahaf, a sixteen-year-old girl who doesn't cover her hair, the target of a fierce campaign of criticism led by Islamist conservatives. After a religious leader, Mohammad al-Fattah, posted a *fatwa* (religious edict) on Facebook that condemned the group, Islamists who supported his statement accused the band of inviting girls and boys to mix together, which some consider unlawful and immoral. They declared that the band "corrupts society." Because the band performed with a girl on stage, the Gaza police stopped many of their activities and it became increasingly dangerous for them to perform.

However, most people who commented on the matter dismissed the criticism as extremist and praised the band for its art and for reviving Gaza's love of music. Singer and law school graduate Hamada Nasrallah, a member of the group, stated that "the band is trying to send a message to the world: 'Gaza loves life and has another face that isn't shown in the media.'"[20] Said the teenage Rahaf, "We love our country. We resist by singing, by art."[21]

Cinemas—Between Occupation, Islamism, and Siege

Another feature of Gaza's cultural life historically is cinema and film, and there have been consistent, albeit largely unsuccessful, attempts to revive it. The first time I ever went to a cinema was in February 2020 in Arizona. My cousin Abdallah, who was born in Saudi Arabia the same year I was born in Gaza, invited me to stay with him for two days in Tempe, where we spent some time walking in the mountains and then watched a film in a nearby cinema. It was a crucial experience for me. I could sit next to my cousin in

a hall full of people and watch a newly released film on a screen bigger than our orange tree.

Back in Gaza and during my studies at the Islamic University of Gaza between 2010 and 2014, I walked around in my free time. I always passed by a long-abandoned building with broken windows and some burn marks on its outside walls. Empty cans, plastic bags, and dust covered its entrance. Every time I passed, I would see a young man selling watermelons, batteries, and flashlights. The building was Al-Nasr Cinema. You needed to look carefully to read the fading letters on the sign in front.

Unfortunately, there is no definitive record of the history of cinema in the Gaza Strip except for stories in the memoirs of some well-known Palestinian figures and what has been circulated orally from one generation to another. Most Gazans will tell you that the first cinema in the Gaza Strip opened in 1944, when Hajj Rashad Al-Shawwa, former mayor of Gaza, obtained a license for Al-Samer Cinema. He brought white sheets from the Palestinian city of Majdal for a screen and curtains. He purchased equipment from Europe, and films were brought from Egypt by train. People sat and watched films while planes flew overhead during World War II. Among the most famous visitors were the singer/composer Farid al-Atrash and his sister, the singer Asmahan. The cinema was packed with people eager to see them.

After the 1948 Nakba, UNRWA showed films aimed at the refugee audience, using mobile projectors. The agency transported these cinemas-on-wheels to the different camps and showed a variety of films, some about personal hygiene and health.

After 1953, Al-Nasr Cinema expanded to three thousand square meters to accommodate the demand. Following the 1967 war, some cinemas closed temporarily since they relied on Egyptian films and companies, which Israel prohibited. Thereafter, all films came from Israel. During the 1970s, the number of cinemas continued to grow, reaching ten in total. The most well known were Al-Nahda, Al-Salam, and Sabrin in Rafah; Al-Huriyya in Khan Younis; and Al-Nasr, Al-Jalaa, Al-Amer in Gaza City (Al-Samer Cinema in

Gaza City was closed in 1969, following the 1967 war). All of the cinemas were privately owned and there was a healthy competition among them.[22]

However, the 1980s witnessed the escalation of mosque-led opposition to these cinemas. Some buildings were destroyed and others closed permanently, effectively restricting if not ending the presence of film in local life. Najah Awadallah, whose filmmaking credits include *The Ember Holder* and *Brides*, believes that religious groups take advantage of the community's lack of exposure to cinema when they claim that film leads to decadence and moral corruption. She argues, "How can we have cinema in Gaza when our films are subjected to government censorship and sections cut out, in the event that they are allowed to be shown in the first place?"[23]

Another producer-director from Gaza, Khalil al-Muzaien, recounted: "When cinema first came to Rafah, it was as if fireworks went off in the neighborhood. There was no television or electricity at that time, and the people of the towns would gather around a single radio and listen. Suddenly the world of cinema was opened to us. To an impoverished boy from a refugee camp, it was an amazing thing. I used to scavenge copper from abandoned British rubbish left behind from the mandate on the border between Rafah and Egypt and sell it at a low price so that I could make enough to buy a ticket to the cinema."[24] That was in the 1970s.

Al-Muzaien added: "Religious incitement against these cinemas started early on with the ascendance of political Islam in its fight against the secularists and leftists whose military presence was waning. Hence, political Islam groups focused on social change in the late 1970s and showed their strength in the 1980s by burning the cinemas and converting others into club houses and wedding halls. Also, the advent of television reduced people's interest in the cinema at the time."[25]

Another important cinema was Al-Amer. Established in 1952, it closed down in 1996, when a group attacked and sabotaged it. Al-Amer Cinema used to show films twice a day, two days a week—Friday and Saturday—so that Gazan workers could watch them with their families. Layla Sarhan, a Palestinian critic and film director, observed: "With the rise of the Muslim

Brotherhood in Egypt in the mid-seventies, and when its ideas appeared in the Gaza Strip, calls and incitement against cinemas by extremists and Islamists increased in the early 1980s. Cinemas were attacked, destroyed, and burned, such as what happened to the Al-Amer Cinema, the Al-Samer, and the Al-Nasr Cinema in the mid-nineties. They considered the presence of cinemas as an offence to Islamic values."[26]

Sheikh Abdullah al-Masri, a founder of the Salafi Dawah in Gaza, heads the Qur'an and Sunnah Society in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, which used to be the site of Al-Huriyya Cinema. Sheikh Masri told *Al-Monitor* that the cinema showed pornographic films that did not fit with its conservative surroundings. This prompted the religious community to gather the signatures of university professors, doctors, government officials, families, and clerics to close the cinema and convert it into the headquarters for the Qur'an and Sunnah Society.

Sheikh Masri recalls what transpired, saying: "In 1985, we heard that al-Huriyya Cinema was showing a certain film. We gathered in Ahl al-Sunnah Mosque located 150 meters away from the cinema and agreed to storm it. We smashed the equipment and tore the screen, but we did not set fire to anything or injure anyone."[27]

Islamist opposition continued after Hamas assumed control of Gaza in 2007. One notable example of the difficulties the community encountered is found in the account of the Red Carpet Human Rights Film Festival. The festival was established in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood in 2015, one year after Israel's fifty-one-day war on Gaza. The theme of this inaugural festival was "Gaza Dignity."[28] At that time, Amer Cinema was opened for cleaning; one could see posters of Egyptian, Indian, and Western films hanging on the dusty and burnt walls. Days before the festival started, volunteers worked hard to get the film theater ready. The initial plan was to hold the screenings at the theater, but the owners reversed the decision and insisted on holding the opening in front of the theater instead. After that event, no one in the Hamas government commented whether there was any plan to reopen the cinema.[29]

A year later, the festival was held again. Al-Muzaien writes about his experience:

> We placed a very big screen in Shujaeeya and there were 2,000 seats for guests and attendants. However, the number of attendants reached 12,000 people. After the success of last year, we wanted to do the festival in Mina (Gaza's old airport), and we agreed with the artist Muhammad Assaf to launch the festival. The festival's slogan was "We Want to Breathe; We Want to Live." Our message was not only about the siege and the occupation, but was about Hamas limits as well. We want freedom of expression. We filed a permit request to the Ministry of Culture. They sent it to security.
>
> During the period of preparation for the festival, security summoned me while I was in the yard of the "Unknown Soldier." I was with my seven-year-old daughter, Yara. A military vehicle stopped and took us to the police station. They told me, "We are not against the festival, but our problem is in gathering the huge number of people and in mixing males and females." The following day, they asked to watch all the films. The Ministry of Culture intervened that night and asked me to bring the films to the Ministry. They gave orders about what films to show, and what scenes to remove. They prevented us from using the Mina area and banned the festival activities in the streets. They only allowed us to work in the hall of Rashad Al-Shawwa Center, which only accommodated 1,500 seats. They asked me to sign a pledge to separate women and men in the hall.[30]

Two of Al-Muzaien's films were banned by the Hamas authorities. The first, *Masho Matook*, was banned in 2010 because it showed, for a few seconds, a young, attractive Palestinian woman in a dress with no veil, walking in front of Israeli soldiers, who kept watching her and whistling at her as she moved.[31] In 2013, another film, titled *36 mm*, was banned because it was said to "slander the Muslim Brotherhood."[32]

Yet, despite the challenges, the Red Carpet festival continued to be held. During its fifth year, whose theme was "I'm Human," "300 films worldwide were submitted, from which only 45 films were selected and showcased," according to the filmmaker Montaser al-Sabee.[33]

In an interview with Al-Aan TV in 2010, Adnan Abu Beed, the former director of Al-Nasr Cinema, was found selling onions and garlic on the streets of Gaza: "I lost my work because the cinema has been closed. Look how different my customers are now," Adnan sadly explained.[34]

In Gaza, culture is not only a site of expression but also a site of oppression imposed both by external and internal forces. Israel bans books and the Islamists ban music and film. The repression has been and

continues to be met with popular critique and resistance—sometimes at considerable personal cost—that both Israel and Hamas want to silence. What do such restrictions and lack of experimentation and access to other ideas, forms of creativity, and ways of thinking mean for Gaza's people going forward? How can their vision be nurtured?

Defying Oppression through Initiatives

Without question, there is considerable pressure on, and censorship of, artistic expression in Gaza. But there is also persistent resistance to that pressure, where imagination and initiative still manage to prevail over reality, and creativity still prevails over oppression. Sometimes these expressions are small, but they are nonetheless important. What follows are some examples.

Training in the Dramatic Arts

In 2016, twenty-three young people from Gaza of different backgrounds started the Al-Forsan (Arabic for "knights") Art Group.[35] Through "shadow acts" and "silent shows" they present plays about the siege, freedom of movement, unemployment, domestic violence, political rifts, family issues, suicide, and addiction.

Drama and acting have been very effective ways for females who were socially repressed to express their feelings and concerns. In 2017, twenty-seven-year-old Idris Abu Taleb formed a team named Palestine Theater, which consisted of twenty-five emerging young actors. Taleb shared with Quds News her thoughts about the presence of females in the team: "Normally, we face difficulties with girls joining the team, and, during training, we get concerned that they may be suspended from work at any period due to the customs and traditions that put pressure on them. However, there are a number of girls in the team who are on good terms with their parents. I hope they will continue with us so that our message

remains strong."[36] Their plays discuss female inheritance, refugee camps, and the wars on Gaza, among other topics.

In late 2018, Issam Shahin established a new drama academy, offering training courses at different levels. Each course runs for three months. In an interview with Anadolu Agency, Shahin complained that "the universities in Gaza do not provide education in disciplines such as drama and theater, and we do not receive any financial support for the academy that we established."[37]

In February 2020, the Basma Society for Culture and Arts launched a project called Empowering Gaza's Youth Through Theatre to address the lack of theater programs and cultural activities in the Gaza Strip.[38] This initiative, funded by the International Fund for Cultural Diversity in collaboration with the University of Palestine, enabled young people to develop practical skills in theater production. Among the ninety students who took part, forty-seven were girls. They attended a ten-week training program on community-based theater. The Basma Society also "organized five theatre tours to remote regions across the Strip, reaching audiences that are often deprived of cultural activities. It also provided valuable practical experience for young trainees who had just completed their professional training."

Young Girls Start a Library in Their School

Early in 2017, a group of forty schoolgirls in middle Gaza worked to build a library in their school.[39] When they asked for donations, UNICEF gave them $300, which allowed them to purchase around thirty books. A group of NGOs donated another five hundred books. Early in 2021, their library was born. The girls used an assortment of used boxes and plastic buckets to make shelves, then painted the shelves, along with painting images of flowers and trees on the walls.[40]

TEDx Shuja'iyya

In October 2015, one year after the 2014 war, a group of young people worked to launch a unique version of the well-known American program TEDx, live from the battered Gaza Strip.[41] The festival took place in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood, where Israel had launched a massacre that leveled most of the houses and killed about seventy-four people. The festival's organizers wanted to show "the world that Palestinians, and especially those from Gaza who suffered severely from wars and neglect, have stories worth telling and ideas worth spreading."[42] The event consisted of twelve speakers, who presented in English and Arabic. They spoke to an audience of over a hundred people about struggle, determination, and success in the Gaza Strip.[43]

On the Site of Devastation: Keeping the Show Going

The Said al-Mishal Foundation for Culture and Science was a leading cultural center in the Gaza Strip and housed the second largest theater in Gaza, the ASHTAR Theatre, which produced *The Gaza Monologues* in 2010. Its five-floor building housed a library, an Egyptian community center, offices for cultural associations, and a theater for arts and *dabka*—a traditional Palestinian style of dancing. The center also served as a home for hundreds of workshops, lectures, plays, exhibits, musical performances, and national ceremonies.

Unfortunately, as part of the campaign to demoralize Palestinians and destroy their cultural life, Israeli warplanes destroyed the Foundation's building—including the theater—on August 9, 2018. According to *American Theatre* magazine, "The theatre itself was a special place for Gazans—one of the only large spaces around where they could dress up and sit together and feel the collective emotion elicited by performers who brought their realities to life onstage. It was also a venue for those performers to reflect on their experiences, to create and express their perspectives."[44]

Although Gazans are restricted from importing cement and other materials to rebuild damaged or destroyed buildings, let alone construct new ones, they do more than just stare at ruins. They try to stay positive and move forward. To again use a quote from *American Theatre*, which wholly captures the spirit of Gazans: “Even after their building was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes, the actors and artists of ASHTAR Theatre keep the show going”—in the ruins.

Painting on the Walls of a Destroyed Building

I remember that in 2000, at the age of eight, I used to go to a huge building that had many shops and cafés near our house. I stood at the doors of the cafés to look at football matches from the Spanish La Liga, Italian Serie A, and English Premier League. That was the Italian Complex building. On August 26, 2014, Israel bombed and destroyed that building. However, the derelict tower, once a residential and commercial complex, was given new life in 2019 by Ali al-Jabali, a twenty-six-year-old graphic artist from Gaza, who turned the destroyed building into an art gallery.[45] Al-Jabali, who studied interior design and has been painting since childhood, painted the walls of the sprawling Italian Complex with the haunting faces of those who yearn for a better life.[46]

Al-Jabali transformed the bombed-out shell of a well-known building in central Gaza into a stunning open-air exhibition, divided into two main parts. The first contains four brightly colored murals. The second part contains oil paintings in wooden frames that project the notion that each citizen has the “right to life.” “Some people do not understand our language or our culture, but the expressions and the strength of the faces are enough to understand our suffering. The faces do not need an interpreter,” Al-Jabali said.[47]

Daring to Envision a Future

One of the happiest days in my life was in May 2019, when I was awarded a Harvard Scholars at Risk Fellowship. I was invited as a visiting poet, hosted by the Department of Comparative Literature. Harvard also made me a visiting librarian-in-residence at its Houghton Library. Because the Israeli authorities hadn't allowed me to attend my visa interview at the US Embassy in Jerusalem for two whole months, June and July, in August I had to apply for a visa interview at the US Embassy in Amman, Jordan. To make matters worse, the Israelis did not allow me to go to Jordan through Israel on a shuttle bus. I therefore had to spend more money and time to travel to Jordan via Egypt in September.

On September 25, 2019, when the second branch of the Edward Said Library opened in Gaza City, I celebrated from afar in Amman, with my wife and children. For seven weeks, we waited for our visas in a small rented room in Amman that cost more than some hotels in the United States. As a result of the long visa delays, I missed the first month and half of my fellowship. I arrived in the United States on October 18, 2019.

On February 10, 2020, I had the pleasure of finally meeting Professor Chomsky in his office at the University of Arizona. As we talked about the difficulty of traveling in and out of Palestine, and moving within it, he told me how he had been barred from entering the West Bank via Jordan to speak at Birzeit University. Professor Chomsky, eighty-one at the time, was teaching at MIT. He said the Israelis seemed upset that he had only accepted an invitation from Birzeit and had no plans to speak at Israeli universities, something he had done many times in the past, but not this time.

During my fellowship, I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Professor Chomsky asked if I knew his close friends in Boston, among them Assaf Kfoury, a professor of math and computer science at Boston University. Professor Kfoury was part of an international delegation that went to Gaza in 2012 to take part in a linguistics conference at the Islamic University of Gaza. Professor Kfoury told me about lectures he had given to math students at the university. At the end of his lectures, he asked the students if they had any questions. He was surprised, or maybe shocked, when all that

the students wanted to know was how they could get a scholarship and travel outside Gaza.

To me, this was not surprising at all. It's expected of any young Gazan, especially if they were born in the 1990s, as I was. The past three decades have been marked by near continuou swar and political instability. The Oslo Accords were signed in 1993. The Palestinian Authority was founded in 1994. The Second Intifada erupted in 2000. President Yasser Arafat died in 2004 under mysterious conditions. Mahmoud Abbas was elected in 2005. Hamas participated for the first time in parliamentary elections and won over Fatah in January 2006. Hamas captured an Israeli soldier from his tank on the border in June 2006. A few days later, Israel destroyed Gaza's only power plant, leaving Gaza, until now, in the dark for much of the time. Hamas and Fatah engaged in a civil war to control Gaza in 2007, in which Hamas prevailed. As a result, Fatah leaders and members either fled Gaza or left the scene. Fatah called this a coup; Hamas called it "military resolution." From December 27, 2008, until January 18, 2009, Israel launched a fierce attack on Gaza and murdered more than 1,500 people, about 950 of whom were civilians, while the rest were either policemen or fighters. In November 2012, Israel assassinated the military commander of Hamas, Ahmed al-Jabari, during a truce.[48] An escalation ensued that lasted for eight days. In the summer of 2014, Israel launched its fifty-one-day attack on Gaza, the third attack in six years. A total of 2,251 people were killed, 80 percent of whom were civilians. I lost two close friends; our house was severely damaged.

Since 2006, there have been many reconciliation attempts between Fatah and Hamas, but all failed. The rift between Gaza and the West Bank remains, not only geographically but also politically. I am now twenty-eight years old and have never voted in an election. People my age have been unable to find jobs, including the many thousands with university degrees. Indeed, despite being under occupation and subject to an ongoing siege and oppression, the Gaza Strip still has a very large number of educated people.

Data from 2014 reveal that the Gaza Strip had the highest percentage of educated people in the Arab world, with a literacy rate of 96.4 percent.[49]

In March 2021, many of my students expressed how proud they were of Loay Elbasyouni, a young man from Beit Hanoun in the north of the Gaza Strip, who was on the team that created the NASA rover *Perseverance* that had just landed on Mars. I told my students that every one of them can fly from Gaza to Mars, no matter how many bombs Israel throws on their schools and libraries, no matter how many fingers break under the rubble. I seized the chance and asked them, "What do you want to become in the future?" They answered: "A farmer." "A doctor." "A horseman." "A salesman." "A footballer." "A vendor."

I then asked, "No one wants to be an actor? A pilot?"

"But we don't have a theater or an airport," a couple of them replied in unison.

"You can dream there is one and it will come true," I told them. "Okay. So, there is an airport, a cinema, a theater, a library, and a seaport with a big, big sea."

One student, whose voice I'd never heard over the previous weeks, burst out, "I want to be a captain!" The wind stopped howling through the classroom. His voice pushed the wind back to the sea, faraway.

"I want to be a fisherman," another student exclaimed, "and maybe a diver and make videos in the deep seas, post them on YouTube and get millions of followers on Facebook."

"I wish I could be a pilot so I can go with my friends to camp somewhere on an island," joined another student in a beanie, not a pilot's hat.

Someone asked me, "Teacher, if you wanted to travel, where would you go?"

"To America and Europe," someone uttered before I could find where the sound came from.

"That's good. For me, I would like first to go to Jaffa and see the big tree in front of my grandfather's house," I said.

“That’s romantic,” the boy responded. We all laughed.

“I would make sure to ask all of you to come with me. I would also invite my overseas friends to join us for a cup of coffee on Jaffa’s seashore,” I continued.

“And maybe ask writer friends of yours to discuss their latest books. Maybe we could rent a hall in a hotel?”

“Aha!”

“Why don’t we invite them to Gaza? Wouldn’t we have an airport, as you have said?”

“Hmmm!”

The bell rang and the children left, but the threads of our thoughts continue to grow until this day. We still speak about our dreams during recess and even after classes end.

When we hear the Israeli drones in the sky, we convince ourselves that they are videotaping us while we are playing a match with the winner of the European Champions League, or dancing *dabka* as part of a cultural festival in our newly built theater overlooking the harbor.

A Final Thought: Bombing a Revered Bookstore

On May 18, 2021, Israeli warplanes turned the Samir Mansour Bookstore, one of Gaza’s rare cultural resources, into rubble. This bookstore and publishing house was one that hundreds of Gazans would visit— either as readers looking for a book to purchase or as writers seeking a publisher for their new books. The last time I went shopping there, I was looking for Mahmoud Darwish’s prose books. I found five of them, while the staff were printing handouts for some students. The bookstore is very close to Gaza’s three main universities: the Islamic University of Gaza, Al-Azhar University, and Al-Aqsa University. I can claim that every single student—not to say every reader—in Gaza has stepped in and used the bookstore since it opened in 1999. The Samir Mansour Bookstore played a significant role in promoting culture and resilience in Gaza. It was one of very few

publishers in Gaza. Two friends of mine had their latest works published there; however, the copies of their books were still in the bookstore at the time of the bombing. All the copies, around five hundred each, were irrevocably damaged. Before the bombing, the authors were just a few weeks away from signing their books at the store. I told them, “Don’t despair. Not only can you reprint them, but you can also write new ones.”

It must be noted that the building that housed the Mansour Bookstore had a training center that I visited twice to attend meetings. It also housed another small bookstore named Iqra’ (Arabic for “read”). I used to visit the Iqra’ bookstore to reprint copies of books that no longer are in print or cannot be imported because of the siege.

I felt heartbroken to watch the owner of Iqra’, Shaaban Isleem, crying over what used to be his store, telling passersby and friends, “The store was all I had in my life. My wife and I sold her gold to keep it going and develop it. Now all is gone.”

But we are not.

We are still here.

Appendix: Periodicals in Gaza after the Mandate until the 1967 War

Newspaper/ Magazine/Journal	Year Started	Year Ended	Notes
Hoqouq Magazine	1923	1928	The first Gazan magazine. Founded by Gazan lawyer Fahmi al-Husseini. Covered law, culture, literature.
Al-Sharq	1949	1950	
Sout Al-Shabab	1946	1948	Edited in Arabic and English by Foad al-Tawil.
Sout Al-Ouroba	1947	1950	
Gaza	1951	Unknown	Edited by Khamis Abu Sha'ban and was distributed in some Arab counties.
Al-Raqeeb	1951	1964	
Al-Mostaqbal	1952	1956	
Al-Saraha	1952	1963	
Al-Inti'ash	1952	1958	
Kalimat Al-Haq	1953	early 60s	
Al-Watan Al-Arabi	1954	1955	
Al-Liwa'	1954	1961	Affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.
Al-Awda	1956	unknown	Edited in Gaza, printed in Cairo, shipped back for distribution in Gaza
Al-Wihda	1954	1961	A political, economic, and social newspaper run by the Arab Socialist Baath Party.
Al-Tahrir	1958	1961	
Al-Salam	1958	1967	
Nida' Al-Awda	1959	1967	
Sout Filisteen	1963	1967	
Akhbar Filisteen	1965	1967	
Nida' Al-Tahrir	1965	unknown	

Source: "The History of Palestinian Journalism," Palestinian News and Information Agency, https://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=3701.

A date palm orchard in Deir el-Balah city, in the middle of the Gaza Strip. March 18, 2016. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

In the Haze of Fifty-One Days

Dorgham Abusalim[1]

Everyone talks about that summer. Fifty-one dreadful days. Families massacred with no men left to carry on their name or women to carry their offspring; neighborhoods flattened; bodies shredded to pieces. A lava stream of blood for the blood-thirsty watching on the hills nearby.

They were dreadful all right.

But for me, Israel's volcanic firepower during those days marked the beginning of an eruption that came from within. A little more than seven years later, the aftershocks remain, although they have become subtler as time has passed.

"Hala brother!" I exclaimed loudly on the phone.

"Hey bro, how is Egypt treating you?" answered one of my eight more siblings, most of whom are scattered between Europe and North America.

"Funny you ask, I am actually halfway through the Sinai desert traveling back to Gaza!" I announced.

"Wallah! At least we will have someone to plead with God for us on the Day of Judgment," he chuckled.

"You think so?" I responded while laughing out loud.

"Yes, you will be a martyr! Have you not seen the news—a war is coming!" he explained sarcastically.

"I doubt God will take me for a martyr!" I replied while we continued laughing. "I am bored in Egypt and do not want to overstay my welcome. You know, our siblings here have their lives and families."

"When was the last time you were there?" he asked me.

“Long enough not to count the years anymore. I just really miss Mama,” I answered.

“We all miss her!” he replied.

“Well, listen, I am about to lose reception. Let us start planning a way out in case things become dire,” I told my brother.

“They will! I will see what I can do. Send me your passport and ID numbers,” he replied.

“Will do! Thank you, habibi.”

I was in Egypt for the summer on vacation from my graduate studies abroad. Ever since I left Gaza when I was sixteen, I would spend my summers in Egypt or Jordan, fearing I would lose my scholarship if I returned and became stuck in Gaza. And were it not for Mama’s ailing health, she would have traveled to meet me.

The excitement of staying in Egypt quickly faded after my birthday. I celebrated turning twenty-seven at the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Cairo, spending the night at a suite overlooking the Nile with a summer fling I met there. As with all flings, I never saw him again, but I still think about him sometimes.

With Ramadan quickly approaching, I thought I would rather skip the fast in the comfort and privacy of my parents’ house. So, I decided to go to Gaza a couple of weeks after my birthday.

The journey through the scorching Sinai desert took me back to simpler days when I did not have to stop at Egyptian military checkpoints or take the crumbling ferry across the Suez Canal. Instead, the driver would zoom across the towering Peace Bridge, cutting the trip by three hours. But much had changed since I last traveled through Sinai. Today, Egypt says it is battling terrorist organizations in the peninsula, thus the journey from Cairo to Gaza has become a difficult maze of detours. I must have asked myself a million times, Why is it that there is no airport in Gaza? Why do I have to go through Egypt?

I thought I would have gotten used to the long journey by now, but a strange fatigue quickly took over my frustration. I slept for a couple of

hours before finally reaching Ma’bar Rafah, the border crossing infamous for its closures, besieging my family for months at a time, along with nearly two million others in what we simply call the largest open-air prison on earth: the Gaza Strip.

At the crossing, going into Gaza is never as difficult as leaving. Egyptian border patrol officers are eager to process passports quickly when travelers are entering Gaza, but never when attempting to enter Egypt, even if only for transit to go to Cairo International Airport.

The family chauffeur picked me up once I went through the Palestinian side of the crossing. “Hamdillah A’salameh,” he said. As we drove through Gaza’s eastern highway, I eagerly looked out of the window to spot the rooftop of my parents’ house. Sometimes, when I am thousands of miles away, I find myself looking for it on Google Earth. “Where are we going?” I asked. “Oh, we are taking a shortcut! Hamas built this new road connecting the highway straight to your neighborhood. This way we avoid the downtown traffic,” answered the chauffeur.

It was not long before I finally saw the familiar landscape of our house, nestled on top of a hill, majestic as ever with Baba’s famed orchards, except for the dirt road leading up to it. “I cannot believe the city has not paved this road yet.” I thought to myself.

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“Ahlan, ahlan, ahlan! Praise God for your safe return, my handsome Lord,” Mama embraced me as I leaned downward to kiss her feet when I arrived.

“Malika! It’s so great to see you!” I said excitedly.

“Ya Lord! Come here boy!” Baba called out from his wheelchair.

“Hala ya malik! It’s been too long since our last summer together in Amman,” I joked, referring to the time when Baba met me in Jordan and had a severe stroke that turned the vacation into a long hospital stay. Despite his age, the stroke left him with little damage, only paralyzing one of his legs.

“You are a fool! You will get stuck like me. I already missed a semester,” my younger sister rushed in to hug me. “But I do not care, I would rather stay with Mama,” she said.

“You need to go back to Amman and finish your studies!” I responded with a smirk.

“I am not a nerd like you. I missed you though,” she replied.

“Where is she?” I asked about my other, older sister. “Oh, she is at her place,” Mama answered. My older sister married a year ago. I could not make it to her wedding, just like I had not been able to make it to many important family occasions over the years.

“Come here, let me feel you,” Mama patted me down head to toe to feel my weight. She lost her sight several years ago, but not her motherly touch. “You are too skinny!” she said in dismay. “We’ll take care of that. The bath is ready, go shower,” she commanded.

“Yes, go, go!” My younger sister turned to the housekeeper. “Make us *shisha* and prepare the table to play Hand!”

“Slow down sis, let me rest first,” I said as the rush of seeing the family for the first time in a few years began to dwindle and I felt the fatigue of the journey overwhelming me.

When I walked up the stairs to shower, I inhaled the scent of our house, tracing back memories of my rebellious teens and robbed childhood. “If only the walls of this house could speak,” I lamented to myself.

“Yikes! How can you people handle the water here!” I told Mama after my shower. “My skin is already irritated!” I exclaimed.

“You will get used to it in no time. What would you like to eat?” Mama, whose food is second to none, began laying out the menu options: *maftoul, fatteh, maklouba, melokhiyya, qedre, mahshi*, steak, roast beef. “Anything you want, just name it. The cook is at your command!” she said.

“Not *maklouba,*” my younger sister chimed in. “You will have that when you go visit our sister at her place! It became her signature dish.”

It is customary in our culture to visit newlyweds at their house with a gift. I used to bring perfumes for the family and T-shirts for the house staff.

But, as I grew older, I learned that the best gift is money.

“Come in, come in!” my older sister proudly invited me into her apartment a few days later. She spent almost a year planning, designing, and furnishing it. It was the talk of the town, as was her wedding, because hers was a love marriage that had jealous people whispering all sorts of things.

“Wow! Who knew you could pull this off!” I joked. “You have a beautiful place. I love the couch pillows and the lighting fixtures,” I said as she walked me through the apartment. My older sister loves the Egyptian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. Her couch pillows had portraits of her favorite celebrities: Soad Hosny, Oum Kalthoum, Hind Rostom, and, of course, the collection is not complete without the devilishly handsome heartthrob Omar El Sherif.

“Dinner will be served soon. My famous *maklouba*, you will love it,” she said.

“Better be as good as Mama’s,” I responded.

“It’s close, you will see!”

“Where is your husband?”

“He will join us soon. Hopefully, we will eat before the electricity goes out for the night. Running the generator is becoming costly because of the fuel shortage,” she said.

“You must work with your husband to leave here, emigrate anywhere,” I told my sister.

“I do not want to talk about these things. Tell me, how is life? No boyfriend yet?” she keenly inquired. Perhaps she was trying to show her support and love for me. While catching up, I reached into her hand and placed a hundred-dollar bill. She resisted the gift and I insisted on it until she accepted, all in line with our carefully choreographed culture.

“I am proud of you,” she said, “my baby brother growing up to visit me and my husband with a gift of his own.” She teared up.

I gently laughed off her sentiment. “We are only two years apart!”

Her husband, who married my sister against all odds, was eager to meet me. We did not know each other very well. The dinner was an excellent

icebreaker. As we devoured the *maklouba*, we spoke about all sorts of things, from my travels abroad to the situation in Gaza. We all thought a war, especially with Ramadan around the corner, would be short-lived, nothing more than a targeted skirmish between Hamas and Israel.

“Hey bro, how is it going in that hellhole?” asked one of my brothers on the phone.

“It’s going. I am not doing much, which is exactly what I needed, except I have this hint of a fever that I cannot seem to shake off,” I replied.

“Gaza does that! You should not have gone in,” he irritatingly said.

“Well, I am here now,” I said resignedly. “What’s going on?”

“You need to go to town with the chauffeur and stock up on fuel for the generator. I called a guy at the gas station, and he will handle it. You just need to take as many containers as you can. Do it tonight,” he instructed me with an urgent tone.

“Okay, calm down, will do!” I said.

“And take good care of Mama and Baba, all right?” he pleaded with me.

“My gosh, we are not going anywhere, do not worry. When did you become so sentimental?” I chuckled.

“This one is going to be massive. Just take care,” he ominously warned me. “I have to go now.”

Three days after the dinner at my sister’s house, our prediction of a short-lived skirmish was proven eerily wrong. My brother turned out to be right.

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We are told technology is fundamentally a force for good but, having recorded the first of many Israeli strikes on our neighborhood on my mobile phone, I know that technology can be a badly triggering medium. And it is not lost on me that Israel’s technological prowess reduced me and my family to possible testing targets for its advanced weapons. Even years later, watching the video of the strike freezes me in place, overwhelming me with the fear I felt for my life and for my family.

“Girls! Let us all go downstairs, grab Mama from her room!” I whispered in a trembling voice.

Baba has been living on the ground floor for some time now because of his paralysis. When the war started, my parents had insisted my older sister come stay with us. Her husband, who I learned is as stubborn as all the men in my family, insisted to stay in his house at first, but joined us later. After all, our house is the center of our universe.

We huddled around on the ground floor, cornered between as many walls as we could count in our quest for safety, sipping coffee, tea, and fresh mango juice while smoking away a long night of bombardment. Mama had the radio by her side. “Heavy bombardment of civilian areas across the Gaza Strip means we are in for a wide-open confrontation,” said a news analyst on the local channel.

“Mama, please turn it off. I think we all know what we are in for,” I forcefully asked her. My older sister turned to me, quietly gesturing with her hands to keep the radio on. All Mama has left after losing her sight is listening to the radio. I obliged.

I vividly remember how I tried to discern the nature of the strikes, whether they were tank or submarine missiles, or rockets fired by an F-16 fighter jet, or perhaps a drone bomber. The shock and boom of some strikes felt different than those I had experienced before I left. Back then, my siblings and I would try and guess the kind of firepower to distract ourselves. But these days, there are just too many kinds of macabre weapons that Israel has developed to tell the difference.

Anyway, this time, I would become distracted by a different kind of war, the one raging within me.

My skin irritation turned into a severe itchy rash dotting the lines of my veins, and my fever kept climbing up along with the intensity of the war. “Oh, my boy, I cannot bear to hear you scratching your legs like that. Come, I will have the housekeeper prepare an ice bath,” Mama pleaded with me. “The stress of the war is taking its toll on you,” she said in astonishment at the state of my health. “I wish you could see a doctor, but

it’s too dangerous. I called the pharmacist, and he will send us fever and rash medicine.” If only she knew what was going through my mind.

I had not been able to sleep because of the constant bombing. I would lie still on my bed and try not to move, staring at the ceiling and counting the seconds between every missile that struck nearby. Some nights, I could hear the whistle of missiles so clearly, I would think to myself: “This is it, tonight our house will be struck. Tonight, we will die.”

The medicine helped a little. After all, as far as we were concerned, life must go on. I was not going to resign to feeling ill during a war. Besides, the lack of sleep did not matter, I was on vacation, and I could catch some sleep here and there.

I spent the evenings with my sisters and Mama on the western balcony, taking in the sea breeze while smoking *shisha* and playing our favorite card games: Tarneeb, Hand, and Trix. As the routine of the war settled in, my aunt, cousin, and his wife would join us. They lived next door. At night, when the entire neighborhood was pitched in complete darkness, we would spot the lit tail of a *zannaneh*—a drone that buzzed so loudly I felt it was designed for sonic torture.

So, the nights would go on. But, as the stream of bloodshed roared into the third week of hostilities, I learned that routine and war are two words that do not belong in the same sentence.

“Dorgham! Dorgham! Wake up! Everyone! Mama! Help!” My older sister rushed out of her room, completely panicked. “I heard it, oh my God I heard it!” she said as if she had heard the voice of a ghost.

“Calm down, I cannot understand you, heard what!?” I asked while slowly pulling myself out of bed after another sleepless, feverish night.

“A roof-knock! On our brother’s house next door!”

One of my older brothers, who has been working abroad for years, built a house on a plot of land Baba had given him for a time when he and his family would return. His life’s work is now in jeopardy. A “roof-knock” is what Israel calls a fair warning: a small missile is dropped on the target to alert any civilians who may be there to evacuate. The irony is that the roof-

knock is, in fact, deadly. So the idea of evacuation is pointless. The roof-knock is then followed by a bigger missile capable of destroying two-, three-, and four-story buildings. I saw footage of this horrific so-called warning on the news. Caught between certain death and displacement once again, some families did not make it out of their houses in time.

“What! Are you sure!? Where is Mama! Where is everyone!” I said in shock. “Yalla, yalla, yalla!”

“Where!?” My sisters screamed.

“The garage,” I replied. My brother’s house is east of ours, and the garage is west, located on the lower slope of the hill. I thought it was the safest place. “And get in the car! Where are the car keys!?” I asked my sisters, in case we had to leave.

“Make sure you grab our bags and dress modestly in case we end up at a school shelter!” Mama told the girls. She had asked the housekeeper to pack in advance, preparing for the worst.

“Mama, did you pack your jewelry!? And the land deeds!?” my younger sister asked. “The deeds yes, not the jewelry,” Mama replied.

“What!?” my sister responded as she rushed out of the car to pick up Mama’s jewelry box.

“It does not matter!” I screamed.

“It’s fine, we will be all right,” Mama tried to calm me down. It felt like an eternity until my sister returned to the car.

“Why are you not moving?” she asked while catching her breath.

“Give me a minute!” I said while breathing heavily.

“They say the second strike comes only a few minutes after the roof-knock,” one of my sisters explained. “Yalla!” the other added.

What if we leave the garage and a drone strikes us? Would we become suspect if we are seen driving away from the site of an airstrike? These and a million other questions rushed into my mind.

“Yalla!” my sister snapped me out of my panic.

When we left the garage, a few meters down the road, we stopped for an ambulance going east of our house.

“Why is there an ambulance? Was there anyone at my brother’s house? Is anyone hurt? Call the housekeeper!” I asked my sisters.

We decided to simply drive next door, to my aunt’s. We knew it was not safe there, but we could not fathom the idea of going too far from our house. “May God curse them all!” my aunt prayed. “Why would they destroy our houses like this?” she added.

“I think there was a resistance fighter in the field by the house,” my cousin speculated. “They must have targeted someone or something.”

My aunt turned to me. “Dorgham, you have lost so much weight! Who knew a war could make people so sick! I know exactly what you need! Would you like some wine?” she said with an eager grin.

I was never a fan of wine. My go-to drink is rum, followed by vodka, then whiskey. But I had no choice. “I’ll drink anything at this point,” I responded. We spent the next couple of hours anxiously anticipating the bigger missile, debating whether it was safe to go back. The missile never came.

When we returned, the family and the house staff went to sleep off the shock of the day. I stayed in the kitchen, smoking like a chimney, staring out of the window eastward until the sun came up.

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“You made it!” I said to the housekeeper, who has not been able to come to our house for some time.

“I came as soon as they announced a cease-fire,” she explained. Several cease-fires were brokered throughout the entire war for humanitarian reasons, but they were all short-lived, and often fell apart within hours.

“It’s all a lie, they are still bombing everywhere,” she said while shaking her head in dismay.

“Who will take you back to your place?”

“Anyone. All I need is to be dropped off at the taxi station. No one wants to drive all the way to my place. They are all afraid because it is close to a hotspot.”

“Okay, I will take you to the taxi station. I need to get out of here. Baba has been getting on my nerves,” I told her.

“Are you feeling better? Your mother mentioned lesions in your mouth and a swollen throat. Eat salty things with lots of olive oil and drink warm fluids, that should help,” she softly suggested as I looked at her in shock. I was never comfortable discussing medical details with anyone.

“Are you ready to meet your maker? We can die any second while driving to the taxi station,” I joked with the housekeeper a few hours later.

“Please do not say that!” she pleaded with me.

Piles of rubble lined the streets. The housekeeper shared stories she heard about every strike. One story stuck with me—the house of a former classmate. I’d heard a few days earlier on the news that he, his sister, and wife were killed in a strike. As we drove by the rubble of his house, I wondered if we would we have reunited if a war had not broken out. Would I have tried to rekindle friendships lost to time?

I did not want to return to my parents’ house so soon. So, I decided to go for a ride on the coastal highway, blasting music and simply letting go.

I parked the car by the edge of a cliff and looked out into the horizon of the sea, smoking my cigarette while listening to the waves crashing. I remembered the times when I would sneak out to meet a fling of mine, and our teenaged bodies would climax in his car at a seaside cliff not too far from where I was parked.

For a moment, the rush of memories felt sweet, but that quickly faded away as I walked further down memory lane.

“*Qiyam!*” My seventh-grade teacher militantly instructed us to stand as the headmaster entered our classroom.

“Quiet now! This is middle school! Your journey to becoming proper men begins today,” said the headmaster as he looked down on us. “What period is this?” he asked our teacher.

“Religion,” the teacher answered.

“Who can tell me about the Day of Judgment?” asked the headmaster.

“Me, me, me me,” a flock of my classmates eagerly raised their hands.

“The Day of Judgment begins with a screeching sound so loud it will petrify all God’s creation in place, then the sky, land, and sea will split wide open, the volcanoes will erupt, and the mountains will crumble,” a classmate regurgitated the horror with seamless ease and certainty. “And everyone will face God alone, forgetting their families, friends, sons, and daughters,” he continued.

“I won’t,” I mumbled to myself.

“What?” the headmaster turned to me disapprovingly.

“I won’t forget Mama and the rest of my family,” I responded.

“Look everyone, we have a mama’s boy in our class!” a classmate bullied me while others laughed on.

“Silence! You have a big mouth. Go to my office now,” the headmaster commanded me.

It was not long before Baba was summoned to the school. “What have you done? It’s only the first week of school,” Baba asked me sternly. “It’s the third school you have transferred to!” he exclaimed.

“Go stand outside the office. I will have a word with your father,” the headmaster told me.

“My son will apologize to the teacher and his classmates. He’s a soft but stubborn boy and different from boys his age,” I overheard Baba tell the headmaster.

“We will take care of it. Some students can be agitated by difference. By the end of the school year, your son will be a proper man like his peers,” the headmaster arrogantly promised my father.

Up until I left Gaza, both the teachers and the classmates carried on with their bullying, and so did I with my big mouth shutting them down. By eleventh grade, my last school year in Gaza, I lost count of how many times my father had been summoned to the headmaster’s office.

Mama and I still laugh whenever she reminds me of the day I returned from school asking if she would really forget about me on the Day of Judgment.

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On the ride back to my parents' house, I could swear I heard a whistle so distinct, I wondered if it was him. After all, we did not live too far from one another, and there was a stop sign at the crossroads between his house and my parents'. I wondered if he saw me. If he knew I was back in Gaza.

"Where have you been!?" Mama derided me as soon as I entered the house. "We have been so worried! Baba had a heated argument and slapped the chauffeur for not going with you," she fumed.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked. "He is a grown man!" I added.

"Ya *khawal!"* Baba shouted from his room. He must have heard us talking.

"Here we go. I knew there is no escaping this fight no matter what, even during a war!" I said to Mama as I walked toward Baba's room.

"Where have you been, ya *manyak!?"* Baba asked with utter disapproval.

Khawal and *manyak* are two words I thought I had left behind a long time ago. They mean "faggot." My brothers and I would always get the same words from Baba. They casually dismissed them, but I always fought back. "Really, Baba? Again with this nonsense? I am not a child anymore and you will speak to me with respect!" I fired back at him.

"Come here, bring him closer to me!" Baba instructed his caretaker. The house staff never got involved in our family fights, though I always wondered what they thought and how they felt about Baba's infamous fits of rage.

"What is it, old man? You cannot get up? Why don't you try to run after me? You used to carry a belt, remember?" I bullied him as they all looked at me, startled by my words.

"She has not raised you right!" my father continued with his sharp words.

"Really?" I laughed. "She is my mother, careful now," I warned him. "If she has not raised me right, your divorcée mother did not raise you right either," I said as I dismissively walked away.

I am not one to buy into archaic ideas about family and women, but I knew this was Baba's weakest point: my grandparents' divorce and how grandfather treated Baba's mother. I always wondered how Baba could repeat the same mistakes so often when he never saw eye to eye with his own father because of them.

"Habibi! Please go easy on him. The house staff can deal with him, do not worry about them. They have been with us for years. You have always been tough with him," Mama pleaded with me.

"He is insufferable!" I told her.

"You are too rough on him," said my older sister. "I will not stand for it and will tell the rest of the family. You know he does not mean it the way you think he means it."

"Enough! Let us go to your aunt's, we'll leave him be for some time," Mama attempted to diffuse the tension with her usual method of avoidance and pretending that leaving Baba alone was a solution. It never worked.

Baba's rage knew no boundaries. We were sitting on my aunt's balcony when he appeared on our balcony, only separated from us by a parking lot, waving his gun around.

"Is that a gun!?" I asked with my jaw dropped to the floor. "I guess old habits die hard!" I continued while laughing uncontrollably.

"Go back inside, old man!" my aunt shouted across the parking lot while my cousin tried to calm him down. I sat there in disbelief, looking at the toxic masculinity of our world come to life, complete with a gun. Baba fired three shots into the sky while leaning on his caretaker, as if to say he is in charge. I could not help but think what would have happened if a drone captured an image of him with his gun pointed upward. Would Baba have been mistaken for someone attempting to down a drone with a gun? Israel came up with all sorts of excuses to justify the mounting death toll. The details did not matter, only the optics of it all.

"Long live the martyrs! Long live the martyrs!" Our neighborhood mosque announced.

“They should play uplifting music instead of screaming chants,” my aunt chuckled. We were never a family tied to religion or the neighborhood mosque. I guess the Imam’s call to the morning prayer with his terrifying voice had woken us too many times. The family did not feel inclined to pray.

I, at least, can say I tried. But I stopped going to the mosque when the Imam instilled terror and fear in me the time I asked him about sexuality. He rejected any discussion that would deviate from what is accepted as normal, laying out the various ways of executing the death penalty for those he described as “deviants.”

Ever since, I’ve grown to appreciate Mama’s outlook on matters of faith and religion. She prays five times a day and has gone to Mecca twice, but she raised us all to be the sovereigns of our faith. She never asks me to pray or fast. Our relationship with whichever faith was our own. Imams, priests, rabbis, and merchants of religion, as she would call them, have no business in it.

As the stress of Baba’s mood faded away, we returned to our house. Baba insisted on making amends. It is his signature move to never let any one of us go to sleep while upset. “I am an old man, my boy,” he told me. I sat quietly by his bedside until he fell asleep.

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“And what about the Gazans! They are all Hamas and deserve the war. Any Gazan who thinks differently must be slapped with a shoe!” announced a vulgar Arab populist host of a widely followed talk show in Egypt. I turned my head away from the television and saw it: a sticker of an Egyptian flag on Baba’s bedroom door. His mother was Egyptian. Baba has always been proud of his Egyptian heritage and would tell us stories of his escapades in the north of Egypt. We would spend many summers in Cairo over the years, but anti-Palestinian sentiment in the country had reached repulsive levels. I could not bear looking at the flag and I swiftly got up and began removing the sticker.

“No!” Baba said.

“I do not want to hear it, Baba. I cannot believe you fell for their lies and actually fought in one of their wars,” I snapped.

As I scraped the sticker off, I dreaded the prospect of the journey through Sinai to Cairo International Airport, under the circumstances. I still felt incredibly fatigued, and my fever was barely subsiding.

“One hell of a vacation,” Mama said as I prepared to leave the next morning during a humanitarian cease-fire just a few days before war ended officially.

“Yes, I came and brought the war with me,” I joked.

“I hope circumstances will be better next time,” she sighed.

“Next time!? There will not be next time, Mama. I am done with this miserable place. If you want to see me, you can come to wherever I am. I will complete all the visa applications!” I announced.

“Don’t talk like that! Home will always be home,” she sternly replied.

“All set?” asked the chauffeur.

“Yes, is the cease-fire in effect yet?” I asked. “Are we certain the crossing is open today?”

“Yes, we are good to go,” he answered.

I do not recall the moment I stepped out of the house. I do not remember if I hugged my parents and sisters. I must have been overwhelmed by the rush of it all and the desperation to leave.

“So much rubble,” I said to the chauffeur while shaking my head.

“This is nothing, only the beginning. Farther east is where the real destruction is,” he replied. We were passing through Khan Younis, the governorate where the Khuza’a massacre had taken place a few days earlier. The town had been practically flattened to the ground, like the Shujaiyya neighborhood.

When we arrived at the crossing, I realized I was in for a very long journey. The arrivals hall had been bombed. Its rubble lay on the ground, and thousands of people were trying to leave. Many of them would not make it. Egyptians allowed travel only for the injured who needed treatment elsewhere, humanitarian cases, and bearers of foreign residencies and visas.

For whatever reason, being a Palestinian from Gaza triggers the worst and most humiliating treatment while traveling through the Arab world. Soon after we left the Palestinian side, we were marched into a nasty, stinky arrivals hall on the Egyptian side. I had left my parents' house at seven in the morning, and would not leave the Egyptian side of the crossing until twelve hours later.

I tried to remove myself from the gross reality of this trip. I would step outside to have a cigarette, not caring much for what others thought about me smoking at the tail end of Ramadan—supposedly the holiest days. I am convinced not a single person in Gaza fasted that Ramadan, at least not spiritually. How anyone could fast under the weight of constant bombardment and the injustice of it all, I still wonder.

The wait felt endless, not least because my mind was conjuring up the worst scenarios about the illness I went through. I kept telling myself that I felt better and would go see a doctor as soon as I arrived at my destination.

But I realized something had gone terribly wrong when I saw a young man experience a seizure.

He must have been my age. A bearded man, approximately my height, he wore a black and red T-shirt. He collapsed suddenly and began seizing, swirling in the smoldering August heat, with foam coming out of his mouth. I looked on as people rushed to help him. I wanted to help too. Instead, I turned away and continued smoking my cigarette.

As I looked around, I saw a crumbling sign that read, "Welcome to Ma'bar Rafah, Egypt." I was suddenly struck by the realization that the Arabic word *ma'bar*, "crossing," shares the same root of the word "Hebrew," referring to the Hebrew tribe, not the language, who we are told crossed the Sinai in the exodus. I remembered one of my favorite political dramas, *The West Wing*. In an episode about the facade of making peace in the Middle East, the writers predictably portrayed an unfavorable view of Palestine. But as I endured the humiliation at Ma'bar Rafah, one line from the episode could not feel truer to me: "Palestinians are the Jews of the Arab world."

As a traveler with a foreign residency abroad, I was not allowed to stay in Egypt or travel through Sinai alone. Instead, I was escorted by a military convoy directly to Cairo International Airport along with others, as if we were criminals. I would not make it to the airport until four after midnight. I wondered what the fate of the injured was. Did they make it on time? Did they survive?

“My God! What happened to you?” my older brother asked in shock when he met me at the airport. “Thank God you are still in one piece—a very skinny piece,” he tried to cheer me up. “Your flight is in a few hours. I am sorry I could not convince anyone to let you stay in Cairo. I tried all my contacts,” he continued.

“I would not stay here even if they offered me citizenship!” I said angrily.

“Hush now, there are security guards everywhere,” he gently said. “Here, take this. Let me know if you need more when you arrive,” he handed me some money.

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I do not think about that summer often, but when I do, I find myself paralyzed in a place and time overwhelmed by indifference—the same indifference I felt when that young man began seizing at the border crossing. Yet, despite it all, I still imagine and hope for a time when that godforsaken land would rise from the depths of apathy to cherish and celebrate difference.

When the plane took off, I felt a sudden lift in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to weep for what had been and for what would come to be. For an image of myself that I knew had been shattered by the bloodshed and the pain. But the time for tears had passed, and deep down I knew a long journey of healing, of finding myself again, lay ahead.

I wondered whether anyone is capable of completely healing the scars of war, injustice, shame, loneliness, and disappointment. I wondered if I even wanted to be healed, if the pain would be a good reminder of the cruel

indifference of this world. I put on my headphones and began listening to the one song that got me through the haze of those fifty-one days. I would listen to it when I needed to be alone, defying death away from a world that mistook my pain for everything other than what it was: pain to be heard, to be understood, to be embraced.

I put on my headphones and began listening to the one song that got me through the haze of those fifty-one days: “I Lived” by OneRepublic.

Palestinians wait to cross to Egypt at the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Palestine in the southern Gaza Strip. May 26, 2015. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Travel Restrictions as a Manifestation of Nakba: Gaza, the Path Backward Is the Path Forward

Yousef M. Aljamal

In 1987, as my father made his daily trip home from his job in Israel, he was stopped at the entrance of our neighborhood in Al-Nuseirat refugee camp, known as Block A, which used to be a British prison during the First World War. Israeli soldiers wanted some entertainment and who better than my father to entertain them? Or at least they thought so. In an attempt to humiliate my father, the soldiers asked him to dance in front of the crowd that had gathered at a café on the opposite side of the road to listen to classical Arabic music. My father thought for a second before accepting their offer, knowing that if he said no, he would be beaten, arrested, tortured, shot, or even killed. He asked them to clap for him so that he could dance. Once they put their guns aside and started clapping, my father picked up his slippers, and making use of his very thin body, sped away.

People in the café started laughing at the Israeli soldiers, who now were the ones humiliated, so the soldiers got angry and started running after my father, seeking to capture him and teach him a lesson. He was literally running for his life and was much faster than his pursuers. In a few seconds, my father disappeared in an orange grove and climbed a high tree he knew while playing there as a child. The soldiers kept looking for him without much luck. He hid there until they left. During this time, all kinds of rumors broke out in the refugee camp about my father being captured, beaten, killed, or tortured by the soldiers. My grandparents started looking for him, including at the military outpost at the entrance of Al-Nuseirat refugee camp where Palestinian prisoners would be held. My grandmother had

started crying for her son when his voice was at last heard throughout the refugee camp. Once the soldiers left the orange grove, my father walked to a nearby mosque and, using his beautiful voice, made the call for the Maghreb (sunset) prayer. This was his way of communicating with his worried family. We Palestinians were dancing under occupation decades before this incident, and have ever since.

The moment the Nakba befell the Palestinians in 1948, it left huge scars, both physically and mentally, scars that time has yet to heal. The social fabric of the Palestinian community was shattered, with families suffering life-changing shocks.[1] In addition to the mass exodus, Palestinians experienced the loss of family members, the injury and imprisonment of others, and the scattering of Palestinians to the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, neighboring Arab countries, and beyond, in what became known as Shatat, or "the Diaspora." The Nakba was only the start of a complicated and still ongoing process of fragmentation that has defined the Palestinians' social, political, cultural, and economic interactions for the past three-quarters of a century.[2]

As my grandparents left Aqer (Acre) in 1948, a village four kilometers to the south of Ramleh in historic Palestine, they had no idea that their long walk to Gaza by the beach would (re)shape their social relationships for decades to come. My grandmother Zainab Aburahma, then in her early twenties, had to carry her only baby, Ghalia, all the way to Gaza. She had no option but to keep walking until her feet became swollen. Her weak body didn't help her much. She literally left with nothing but her baby and her husband, Yousef, after whom I was named. Just before they left the village, my grandparents suffered the killing of my great-grandfather, Ahmad Aljamal, when Zionist militias invaded their village. Because they had to leave quickly, they had no time to mourn.[3]

My family ended up as refugees in Gaza, the start of a decades-long journey of torment and family separation, travel restrictions, and permit denials, from which they continue to suffer, just like thousands of other Palestinian families under Israel's military occupation. Half of my extended

family from my father's side ended up in Gaza and the other half, from my mother's side, ended up in the West Bank. This meant that my extended family became fragmented and separated in two geographic areas with no connection for nineteen years, except via travel routes through Jordan and Egypt. Ironically, this fragmentation came to an end, albeit for only three decades, when Israel began its occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967. That is when the Gaza Strip and the West Bank became the occupied Palestinian territories and my extended family could reunite for the first time, under Israeli occupation.[4]

Family visitations between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank were never easy, but they were doable between 1967 and 1993. When the Oslo Accords, the so-called peace accords, between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel were signed in 1993, a more complicated and obstructive system of permits was introduced for Palestinians wishing to visit both territories.[5] The outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 was the straw that broke the camel's back in relation to the movement of people. Israel's travel restrictions literally cut off Palestinians from one another—in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and those living within Israel proper.[6] I remember taking a bus to Jericho from Gaza with my family after receiving an Israeli permit; after 2000, it became nearly impossible to obtain a permit to travel except in a few cases determined entirely by Israel.

The geographical separation imposed by Israel has had an immense impact on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. My family is no exception. In 2003, my maternal grandfather passed away in Jericho without my mother being able to bid her father a last farewell. Five years later, my grandmother also passed away, and my mother was again stranded in Gaza, unable to attend her mother's funeral, which took place an hour away from her as the crow flies.

What characterizes the imposition of travel restrictions on Palestinians is its intergenerational nature. In 2013, for example, upon leaving Gaza for a three-week speaking tour to Malaysia and New Zealand, I was stranded in

Kuala Lumpur after making a failed attempt to return to Gaza through Cairo. I was sent back to Malaysia because, I was told, “the border with Gaza was shut down.”[7] The trauma of waiting for the border to open and the fear that I might not be able to return to Gaza still haunts me. I was finally allowed to return ten days later in July 2013 when the border reopened for a short while, only to be stranded again in Gaza for three months.

Just like the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, 70 percent of whom are refugees, all Palestinians—be they students, patients, elders, men, women, and children—are subject to onerous restrictions on their movement. Every single Palestinian in Gaza has suffered from such restrictions. Without understanding the complexity of the travel restrictions Gaza, it is difficult to envision the future of this narrow enclave. Gazans’ future rests in allowing people to move freely, including allowing Palestinian refugees to return to their towns and villages in Israel. In addition to uniting Palestinians geographically, this would contribute to achieving greater political unity, since geographical separation has contributed in a significant way to political separation, which is why it has been maintained.

My mother, like thousands of other Palestinians, had to suffer unnecessarily because an Israeli officer decided to reject her permit application to visit her family and hometown a dozen years ago. Her suffering could have been avoided and it had no moral, legal, or political justification. In 2012, my mother was allowed to visit her family for the first time in twelve years. Being granted a permit to see her own family after such a long separation gave her hope and brought some light and happiness to her heart.[8] Getting her permit showed that travel restrictions can be overcome, but it requires Palestinian and international pressure and political will, which seldom exists.

I wish to highlight how Gaza could thrive again if travel restrictions were lifted, and show that lifting these restrictions is possible and doable. More critically, I explain from a personal perspective how Israeli restrictions on movement aim to break up the Palestinian family, the most

important unit in Palestinian society. That Palestinians still exist and function as a collective testifies to Israel's failure in this regard.

Ending the Suffering in Gaza Is Possible and Doable

The suffering of the refugees in Gaza could end. Palestinians still cling to hope: the hope that they will finally be treated as human beings, the hope that they will not experience another Israeli assault, the hope that they will be reunited with their loved ones, and the hope that just like many other people who have won their struggles for freedom, Palestinians at large, and those in Gaza, will also be able to live in dignity without fear, division, or military occupation.

In 2007, my twenty-six-year-old sister, Zainab, was one of the first victims of the siege—if not the first—that was imposed on Gaza by Israel in 2006, and which remains in effect today. Needing minor surgery to replace a mesh inserted in her gallbladder following a previous surgery in Jordan, Zainab was stranded in Gaza waiting for an Israeli permit to enter Jerusalem—only seventy-nine kilometers away—to enter a hospital. The permit was denied a week later.[9]

In Gaza, my family watched my sister's health deteriorate. I was preparing for my high school exams, and Hamas and Fatah were fighting in Gaza's streets over control of the coastal enclave. I remember visiting my sister at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. She was in a very bad shape, tired and weak. Her body had literally turned yellow from her failing gallbladder. When she was allowed to leave Gaza a few days later via the Rafah crossing, which connects Gaza with Egypt, it was for the last time.

Zainab was able to have the surgery in Cairo, but it was too late. Her body was too weak and she passed away two days later, surrounded by my father and my aunt. They brought her body back in an ambulance to the Egypt–Gaza border at Rafah, but the crossing was closed. For two days they tried to find a way into Gaza. They brought Zainab's body to the Karim Abu Salem crossing, which connects Egypt with Israel and Israel

with Gaza. The border guards there sent them back to the Rafah crossing. On the third day, they were finally allowed into Gaza. An Israeli soldier condescendingly asked my father why he was crying. When my father told him, the soldier dryly replied, “All of us will die.”

Zainab’s illness and death and my father’s humiliation affected my grades. I sat for two English exams, and each time I was not in the mood to take them, instead leaving answers blank. It was especially bad during the second exam, as I had to take that one a day after my sister passed away. But I had been good at English, and even though my lowest grade was in that subject, I decided to join the English Department for my undergraduate degree. It was how I could make sure to tell her story.

This is the reason you are able to read this.

Lifting travel restrictions is a realistic possibility in the Gaza Strip. Gisha, an Israeli human rights organization, has campaigned on behalf of hundreds of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip who have been denied permits to travel.[10] In 2012, after twelve years of failed attempts, my mother was one of them. After filing a case on her behalf before an Israeli court, Gisha was able to obtain a four-day permit for my mother to visit her family in the West Bank, where she grew up. My mother “overstayed” her visit by thirty-two days, a day for each year she had spent in Gaza, prohibited from leaving. Imagine, she violated her permit to stay in the town that was her home.[11]

It was not an easy visit for my mother; she shed many tears after being reunited with her family, which she calls “tears of happiness.” I call them the tears of the injustice that we have been subjected to and the way it has dehumanized us. Realizing how unfair it is, we weep.

My mother had to learn the many names of her new nephews and nieces who were born and grew up while she was confined to Gaza. It felt strange to be reconnected with her family after so many years. She felt like a foreigner in the town where she was born, somewhat of a stranger among people with whom she had grown up. My mother made use of her visit to “debrief” her family about the most important events that took place in

Gaza while they were separated, and her family did the same about their life in the West Bank. The visit was full of mixed emotions for her that centered on years lost, on trying to know her family again.

My mother visited her parents' graves and wept.

My mother's visit to her family in the West Bank gave me hope that I, too, would meet them one day. My maternal uncle Mohammad passed away in 2015, and fortunately my mother was allowed to attend his funeral and be with her family. I hadn't seen my uncle since 1999, but I vividly remember our phone conversations. We would talk about his love of English literature, especially Shakespeare.

In 2014, I visited Jordan for the first time in more than a decade, where I met with many of my West Bank and Jordanian family. This was "my solution" to the issue of restrictions on travel in Gaza, as I knew too well that obtaining an Israeli permit to visit my West Bank family was nearly impossible, considering my age and Israeli policies. (If you have a first-degree relative dying in a hospital you might be issued a permit, but even that is far from certain.)

I went to Jordan to meet my aunt Jamila, whom I hadn't seen for fifteen years because of our imposed separation. I waited for her together with my many cousins from the West Bank and Jordan. Once she arrived at Amman's airport from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where she has been living for decades, we all queued to greet her. She knew all my West Bank and Jordanian cousins who were there, except me. The last time we met was in Jericho in 1999 when I was still a child.

My aunt started guessing who I was. She tried three times and gave up. It felt surreal and unfair, in the midst of this celebratory event of meeting my aunt Jamila at last. I had mixed feelings, too. It felt suffocating to realize that for all those years we were separated to such an extent that she didn't know who I was. Time stopped. I remembered my mother in Gaza when she had not seen her sister since 1999. I remembered how she must have felt when she was finally able to see her family in 2012 after more than a decade of separation.

I gazed at my aunt's face and examined her wrinkles and features. Time, illness, and exile had changed her a lot, but her eyes were still shining and clear, the same eyes I knew as a child. "I am Yousef," I said. "Your nephew. I flew in from Kuala Lumpur to meet you." She looked at me in disbelief. Silence fell and we kept gazing at each other with the entire family behind us watching. The look on Jamila's face when she finally recognized me was unforgettable and will always be part of the collective memory of my family.

When she realized who I was we hugged each other tightly for several minutes, as if our unbreakable embrace could compensate for all these years. I made use of my time to get to know my aunt. I felt like a stranger in my own family, and it took me a few days to get comfortable with them. A few days later, more relatives arrived from the West Bank and the story repeated itself.

A few days later, my cousin Ahmad and I drove our cousin Ammar to the Allenby Bridge that connects Palestine with Jordan and separates me from the rest of my West Bank family. Ammar had arrived from Russia, where he was pursuing his master's degree, to meet Jamila. I remember playing with him as a child in Bethlehem. We grew up apart from each other. When social media websites such as Facebook started to become popular, we reconnected. But it feels so different to connect through a computer screen. Feelings seem so cold, and these screens serve as a reminder of our separation. Why should we meet through a screen when we live two hours away from each other?

As Ammar crossed the border, I stood near the closest point to it, and from afar I watched Aqabat Jabr refugee camp in Jericho, the place I visited with my family many times as a child years ago, when traveling was allowed between Gaza and the West Bank.[12] Ringing in my ears were the words of the late Palestinian novelist Mourid al-Barghouti as he addressed the bridge that separated him from his family for thirty years. "You are no longer than a few meters of wood and 30 years of exile. How was this piece of dark wood able to distance a whole nation from its dreams?"[13]

In 2017, I met with my cousin Samer, thirty-nine, in Germany for the first time. The meeting was emotional, and it was a golden opportunity to speak about how the Israeli occupation had divided our extended family to the extent that we could only meet in Germany after many years of separation. Samer lived in the UAE before he had to leave the country for Somalia in 2006, which was the only country that would accept him at the time. He joined his father there. While in Somalia, he was abducted by a militia that tied him to the back of a Toyota and asked for a $1 million ransom, claiming that he was the son of the late Al-Qaida leader Bin Laden. Everyone knew that he was not, but he was still held for two months. It was only when another militia took over that he was freed. Knowing that it was too dangerous to stay, he took his wife and children and illegally sailed to Yemen. Once things started settling down and he found a good job, the civil war broke out in what was once named Arabia Felix. He then took his family to Saudi Arabia and then Turkey, and finally settled in Germany, where he sought a better future.

When I met him in 2017, he told me that it was his first time in more than a decade that he was able to spend the Muslim holiday of Eid with a family member. His mother, Somaiya, had passed away in the UAE in 2006 before I was able to meet her, as she had left Palestine before I was born.

In 2018, I met with my cousin Wisam in Sweden, where he now lives. The last time I met Wisam was in 2002 in Jordan. Wisam hosted me for a couple of days, during which we shared traditional Palestinian dishes. He bragged about his cooking skills, which he attributed to his mother, whom I met in 2017 in Amman at another family wedding. Meeting my aunts Ruqaya—Wisam's mother—Eman, and Nusaiba and my uncles Bilal and Yasser in Amman was inspiring. It also awakened my sense of humor, which I share with many of them, especially Ruqaya. As a child, I remember her telling my cousins and me that after she passes away, we should write on her tombstone that she was sixteen years old when she died in order to get the sympathy of the people passing by her grave. Time has left its mark on her wrinkles, but not on her spirit and sense of humor, which has grown stronger with the years.

Palestinian families have been the target of Israel's policies for decades. Israel continues to claim that travel restrictions have to do with security. All Palestinians know this claim is baseless. It is meant, more than anything, to divide us. In many conversations with friends and other Palestinians, I was told that Palestinians from Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Israel should marry each other because this would be the strongest message they could send to Israel. While this may sound simple and reasonable, it is increasingly difficult if not impossible for Palestinians to even consider marrying someone from outside their geographical area. Parents fear never seeing their children again or ever meeting their grandchildren. Look at what happened to my mother.

Yet, Israel has not succeeded in breaking up the Palestinian family, which has managed to survive Israel's policies of displacement, isolation, and suffocation. My own family, for instance, remains connected through social media, and they have projects to support the unemployed, to which family members from different parts of Palestine and the diaspora contribute. They have also produced a family tree that allows everyone to track their ancestors and heritage. Our family members have tripled since 1948. It does not matter whether we are in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, the Gulf, Turkey, or Europe—we are still one family.

Travel Restrictions and the Ongoing Nakba

One cannot view the restrictions on movement imposed on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip without understanding the ongoing Nakba, which started with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Restricting the right of Palestinians to move freely, physically separating them from one another, and isolating Gaza, a territory that comprises only 1.3 percent of British Mandate Palestine, was only the start of a long process of separation and isolation. The queues of Palestinian refugees have not stopped since then. In 1967, thousands of Palestinians became refugees for the second time after Israel captured Gaza from Egypt and began occupying it.[14]

In 2014, hundreds of Palestinians reportedly died on their way to Europe as they left Gaza seeking a better future after Israel's massive assault that summer.[15] The Nakba has never ended for the Palestinians, especially those in Gaza. A look at any random spot in a Gaza refugee camp will show that Palestinians are still stranded in the past, in what took place in 1948. The Great March of Return in 2018, when Palestinians from Gaza protested at the border with Israel, is the clearest example of how Palestinians view both their past as refugees and their future as returnees.[16]

"We Live above Occupation and Not under It"

Travel restrictions have shaped the lives of millions of Palestinians in many different ways, starting in 1948. The creation of Israel was the beginning of long-standing geographic, political, cultural, and economic divisions inflicted on Palestinians, who were scattered among the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Israel, and neighboring Arab countries, as well as North America and Europe.

The occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, beginning in 1967, geographically united Palestinians in historic Palestine. Under occupation, Palestinians now had relative freedom to move under Israeli control. However, that freedom was restricted from time to time, depending on events unfolding in the Occupied Territories, especially with the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987. As Israeli settlements expanded in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the movement of Palestinians became more difficult. The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 that resulted in the establishment of the Palestinian Authority imposed a new, more restrictive system of permits. Palestinians wishing to move between Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip needed a permit to cross the Israeli-controlled checkpoints that were now mushrooming in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The system of checkpoints and permits introduced after Oslo has been used as a form of collective punishment, placing even more travel

restrictions on Palestinians. These restrictions have impacted all parts of Palestinian society, including students, patients, families, and workers. The Gaza Strip has suffered the most because of these restrictions. As one of the most densely populated areas on earth with a majority refugee population, and as the center of Palestinian nationalism and resistance to occupation, Gaza has always been a focal problem for Israel. Because of this, Israel has always sought to isolate Gaza from the rest of historic Palestine and, by extension, the rest of the world.

The outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 was a turning point with regard to travel restrictions. As the Intifada wore on, more travel restrictions were imposed that severed Gaza from the rest of Palestine. In addition to destroying the only airport in the Gaza Strip, Israel created and maintained buffer zones both at sea and to the east of Gaza, preventing Palestinians from accessing much of their fertile agricultural lands and the world outside. As travel restrictions tightened, more students, unable to travel, lost their scholarships; more patients died waiting for Israeli permits for medical care outside Gaza; and more families became permanently separated. It became easier for a Gazan to meet a West Banker in Jordan, Egypt, or even Europe than it was in their own Palestinian homes.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip should not be at the mercy of any country in order to realize their economic potential and have access to education or medical care. It is not acceptable that hundreds of Palestinian patients die because Israel rejects their permits to reach hospitals in the West Bank, or because Gaza does not have sufficient medical supplies and equipment to carry out much-needed surgeries. History has proven that the Israeli government will not move on its own to lift restrictions on the Gaza Strip. The people of Palestine, both inside and outside, and the free people of the world should take the initiative to try to end Gaza’s isolation.

Palestinians in the diaspora, with the help of a wide coalition of NGOs and politicians who believe in Palestinian rights, should pressure concerned parties such as Israel and the EU to end the occupation. This campaign should also focus on Gaza’s students, many of whom have lost their scholarships because of travel restrictions. Students should be allowed to

travel to pursue their education outside Gaza without restriction. Palestinian academic institutions should be promoted as protected facilities that should not be harmed under any circumstances. Palestinians in the diaspora and the free people of the world should insist on being allowed entry into Gaza, where they can teach and engage with students, most of whom have never traveled outside Gaza or flourished academically from such exposure.

Palestinian families in the Gaza Strip should be able to visit the West Bank without having to obtain a permit from Israel. The right to freedom of movement and family unification should not be a question on the table or a stick to pressure Palestinians politically. Palestinians from Israel and the West Bank, too, should be able to visit the Gaza Strip at any time and without restriction.

Buffer zones in the Gaza Strip should be terminated and removed completely. This includes the buffer zone imposed by Israel on the eastern side of the Strip, which deprives Gaza of more than one-third of its fertile land. Palestinian farmers have had their lands and crops destroyed repeatedly, and their produce sprayed with chemicals for no reason.

Palestinians' limited access to the Mediterranean Sea should be rescinded. Since 2000, Israel has maintained a buffer zone of three to six nautical miles, which effectively prevents Palestinian fishermen from fishing as it confines them to fish-depleted areas. Very often, these fishermen get shot and some are killed; many are injured, while others are arrested and their boats confiscated or destroyed by the Israeli navy. This can never be acceptable or accepted, and any attempt to do so is illegitimate.

Palestinians should be allowed to contribute to their society and to the world at large. Palestinians will soon become the majority between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, they have maintained a high level of education, including those imprisoned in Israeli jails. Gaza has one of the highest literacy and education rates in the world. There are thousands of educated people who could help make the world a better place through science, knowledge-sharing, and expertise in different

fields. Gaza, for instance, produces one of the best species of strawberries and flowers globally.

Moreover, as I have tried to do here, recounting personal stories of living under occupation is central to our survival as a people. The stories conveyed to my aunt by her mother, who became a refugee at the age of twenty-three in 1948, are vital to who we are, where we came from, and why we belong. It is our duty to keep them alive so that I do not have to mourn another relative from afar because crossings in and out of Gaza were closed—as I mourned the death of my aunt in 2014 while I was in Malaysia for my graduate studies. So that I do not have to mourn another friend as I mourned Ayman Shokor, my childhood friend, whose body was torn into pieces by an Israeli shell during the 2014 onslaught on Gaza, because he happened to be standing on the roof of his family's house. So that we stand up as a nation and compensate for all the days and moments we spent away from each other due to travel restrictions.

Palestinians have the right to be part of the world. After decades of military occupation, they have not yet lost hope. Despite the challenges that continue to confront us, we act—in the words of the Palestinian novelist Ibrahim Nasrallah—as if "we live above occupation and not under it."

A Palestinian with his son walking past a mural that raises awareness against Israel's planned annexation of occupied Palestinian land, in Rafah city in the southern Gaza Strip. July 3, 2020. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Let Me Dream

Israa Mohammed Jamal

My daughter Rawa exclaimed, “What beautiful places we have in our country. Let’s go there, Mama! Please!” I was helping her prepare her third-grade lesson on National and Life Education. I was surprised by the names and photos of beautiful places in northern Palestine, which I hadn’t seen before. The lesson was about tourist sites and included photos of the Palace of Hisham bin Abdul Malik in Jericho, the Haifa cable car, and Mount Gerizim in Nablus.

I told her that we can’t go there because Israel occupies the West Bank and blockades Gaza. This answer disappointed her. But I added, “You are lucky because you study the Palestinian curriculum, and you learn about these places.” I explained, “I studied the Egyptian curriculum when I was your age, so I didn’t have the chance to learn about our country.” Before the Palestinian Ministry of Education was created in 1995 and developed the Palestinian curriculum, we used the Egyptian curriculum and textbooks that focused on Egyptian culture.

Rawa said, “But we can’t visit it now!”

“One day we will take back everything they stole from us. It is God’s promise to us,” I replied.

Forbidden Homelands

I’m a refugee from Breer village in southern Palestine. The Jewish paramilitary gangs forced my grandparents out of their village in 1948 during the Nakba, when the Zionists conquered Palestine and expelled the native Palestinians from their homes. My grandparents fled to a hastily

constructed refugee camp near Rafah, on the border of the Gaza Strip and Egypt. My husband's grandparents also fled to Rafah, from nearby Hatta village.

I remember traveling with my parents to the West Bank when I was a child, about twenty-five years ago. The Israeli military government allowed Gazans to go to the West Bank, but only after giving permission, which it often denied. I can hardly remember the places, names, or views. I just remember the green grass in front of my father's friend's big, beautiful two-story white house. They even had a PlayStation! It was such a contrast to our one-story home with its tiny room to greet guests and two small bedrooms for me and my seven siblings. That big house created vivid memories. I thought it was a palace, like those I had seen in cartoons such as *Alice in Wonderland.* I wished that we had such a house, or even half of one.

And I remember when we went to the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque during that trip. Israeli soldiers patrolled in front of it, heavily armed. They were scary, and I was afraid to come close to them. My mother caught my hand as we entered the mosque and told me in a loud voice, "Don't be afraid." I understood that she wanted those soldiers to hear her. I felt terrified because I had heard that they killed my uncle while he underwent surgery in a hospital by removing one of his organs. And I had seen them attack our houses, searching for boys who had thrown stones at their jeeps. So, I knew that they could do whatever they wanted to me, my family, and my friends.

Miserable Childhood Memories

My memories of childhood are full of fear and loss. I missed people who had died or been imprisoned. And I was always angry at Israeli soldiers' rotten treatment of people.

I remember one day playing in the sand in front of my neighbor's house. Suddenly, a soldier jumped onto the doorstep of our home and looked

inside. He didn’t even knock on the door. I froze, fearing that he would arrest one of my brothers.

I also remember a soldier called Ramee, who spoke Arabic fluently. He faked kindness and gave me candy. I didn’t realize that he was trying to get me to tell him the names of guys who demonstrated and threw stones. Fortunately, I didn’t know anything about those guys, and my father knew how to deal with him by saying that his children didn’t see what took place on the street as we were kept indoors.

But soldiers also harassed and humiliated my dad. One time they broke into our house in the early morning and ordered him to clean the streets along with the other men from our neighborhood. On another occasion, soldiers broke into our house while my father was taking a shower. They wanted to enter the bathroom, but my mum shouted at them and kept them out. She was able to give my father a *jellabiya* (traditional loose fitting garment) to wear before he faced them.

And I believe that my grandma’s death was hastened by Israeli military attacks. She had survived the flight from Breer in 1948, but bombings and street clashes in 1990 overwhelmed her. She died three years later, bedridden and paralyzed. As this was the first death of a close and beloved relative, I suffered deeply from her loss.

The Besieged Neighborhood

Soldiers attacked our neighbor’s house in the early morning when I was young. They arrested Ihab, one of their young sons, and put him in prison for a long time. He was the same age as my brothers, with whom he played football in the street. Their widowed mother stayed alone at home crying and screaming. All the women in the neighborhood gathered around her for support. My heart ached and I became terrified of going far from our house. I understood my parents’ fear that my brothers could be seized, which made them insist that my brothers stay at home—despite my brothers’ protests.

Israeli soldiers not only raided houses, but also attacked the mosque in our neighborhood many times. Once, my father rushed home from the mosque, right after soldiers left the building. He wanted to take cotton and medicine to help the injured men. My mother stopped him, crying: “You have to pass over my dead body to go there. The soldiers will return and kill you! You will not go!” Before she finished, we heard shooting. The soldiers had returned and killed all the men who remained inside the mosque. Then they closed the mosque and prevented people from saying their prayers there.

Nonetheless, my father got the soldiers’ permission to say *al-athan* (the call to prayer) in a loud voice in the mosque doorway, so that people would know the time for prayer. When he said *al-athan*, I often stood close behind him. I breathed the fresh air and felt my chest expand. I felt both scared and brave, like the cartoon Jerry, who would boldly stand in front of his mouse hole but hide part of his body, emboldened but also scared that Tom would eat him.

As a child, I didn’t understand why we were prevented from going out, but I knew that I hated any authority that gave arbitrary orders. Following my parents’ instructions seemed enough to be safe. I admired my father, who didn’t give up and had the courage to negotiate with armed soldiers to say *al-athan.* My father showed that courage even though the soldiers tried to humiliate him and even though his brother—my uncle—had been jailed after he said *al-athan* at the mosque, against the Israelis’ orders.

My siblings have called me *seesoo al-aneedoo* (a stubborn girl) ever since I was a kid, but they didn’t always understand that I hate the occupiers for issuing orders without giving reasons and without respecting me as a human being. For example, the Israelis didn’t allow us to go out at night, unless for an emergency, such as taking someone to the hospital. They didn’t listen to the reason before they shot us with rubber-coated bullets or imprisoned us.

Despite those restrictions, guys called *al-motaradeen* (the chasers) ran after Israeli jeeps in the streets, shot at them with their simple guns, and

threw stones or anything that would drive the soldiers crazy. They wanted to prevent the Israelis from feeling comfortable while occupying our lands. I liked how *al-motaradeen* challenged Israeli orders even though soldiers followed them and shot at them. Hardly a day passed without martyrs and condolences. The sound of shooting felt as if it were aimed at my head.

I hated the darkness and the night. One day I felt suffocated and cried. I told my father, before going to sleep, “I’m afraid of the night because I always fear death or a sudden Israeli attack on our house.” My father explained: “Every one of us has a period of time in this life, and then will die, and so we worship Allah and follow his instructions to meet him and live the immortal life in his heaven.” My father’s words decreased my fear a little bit, but it didn’t abate my hatred of the night with its shooting voice.

No Chance to Celebrate

We celebrated many annual national ceremonies, which often ended in a catastrophe. There was Independence Day, the commemoration of the Nakba, celebrations held by the political movements, and many other events. Each political party had its own flag and logo, with which they decorated the streets.

One time, I woke up early and went to school full of enthusiasm to celebrate Land Day. The teachers and students decorated the school and prepared the program, under the headmaster’s supervision. Celebrations mostly started with reciting the Qur’an and reading from the Hadith, followed by national songs, poetry, dancing the *dabka*, acting plays, and many other activities.

Unfortunately, we were in the middle of the celebration when protests started. The students in the neighboring boys’ school threw stones to stop our celebration and get us to join their protest. The teachers couldn’t manage the students or prevent the boys from throwing stones. Finally, they submitted to the boys’ demands. They opened the door and we rushed into the crowd. I ran home, terrified. Car tires burned in the streets. Boys threw

stones. Soldiers in jeeps shot and threw tear gas, injuring people whom others then ran to rescue. When I reached home, my mother stood at the door waiting for me and my siblings.

The next day we didn't have school because of the crowds at the funerals for the martyrs. Men bore them on their shoulders, took them to mosques to say the funeral prayers, and then carried them to the cemetery. Afterward they paid their condolences in the martyrs' houses. However, sometimes the Israeli soldiers banned all movement, which prevented families from offering condolences.

I understood that the protesters and *al-motaradeen* wanted to annoy the Israeli soldiers and make them leave our country. Such a major change needs risk-taking, struggle, and frightening experiences. To find happiness, even for just a moment, we must face catastrophes. Whatever the celebration, it will be followed with misery, or tears.

Even the wedding party of my eldest brother, Iyad, blended happiness and sorrow. I remember that I was seventeen and, like the others, I wore beautiful clothes and danced, happy for my brother. Suddenly, the mother of Jad, my brother's close friend, danced with Iyad. She hugged him, in tears. My brother also cried, remembering Jad, who had died on their way home from school. Jad's mother loved Iyad as much as her son. We all cried together. We hugged Jad's mother and danced with her and her daughters.

There was no complete happiness without being followed with sorrow. We should be aware and ready for bad things to follow our happiness. Pessimism preceded any experience that I wished to have or any step I thought of taking, because my happiness was often incomplete. Such repeated disappointments made me hate my life and wish to die or blow myself up among Israelis, so that other Palestinians could live their life without more heartbreaking catastrophes. My fear and my feeling of injustice and hatred fused to create my desire for revenge against the source of that fear and injustice.

My anger became even more intense a year later, in 2004, when I was eighteen. While studying for the *tawjihi* exams, which are crucial for

entering the university, Israel launched another attack on Gaza. I needed quiet and calm to concentrate, but the bombs and murders made that impossible. Moreover, I was surrounded by endless condolences and demonstrations, as people wailed: “We all live and die for Palestine,” and “No one deserves worship but Allah, and the martyr is the beloved of Allah.”

I couldn’t focus. I closed my ears, trying to study as much as possible during the day. I felt myself tracking the timing of the missiles and the sound of their explosions. I wished to die in that war, as it wasn’t worth living. When I said that several times, my mother cried: “Stop talking like that. Don’t talk about yourself like that.” I laughed at her unreasonable fear, because I hated my life more that I feared death. I thank Allah because that year ended, and I got 87 percent on the *tawjihi* exam.

My childhood wasn’t an innocent, happy period. I don’t like to remember it or talk about it. The first time that I mentioned these details was in 2020 when I collaborated with a student at Yale University, who was taking a course called Reporting and Writing on War. However, I found that I couldn’t bear to mention all these details. I felt I was suffocating. The student was kind to me and shifted to a different topic.

Discovering My Mother’s Aches

I feel now that I’m in a totally different era, because I’m a mother who needs peace and wants to live for the sake of her children. Now I understand why my mother was angry when I said I wanted to die.

I married in 2006, two years after I took the *tawjihi* exam. In our tradition men host a private party for the groom. However, my husband couldn’t enjoy a party, because we were scared by war planes and destruction and martyrdom. An endless sadness. But that’s life. People want to live and celebrate in spite of their difficult situation and the unfair treatment by the criminal occupation.

A year before, Israel had evacuated its twenty-one settlements, which had occupied a third of the Gaza Strip. The evacuation didn't mean that Gaza was free and its residents could have a peaceful, normal life. Israel controls Gaza's borders and still threatens us with sudden, savage attacks.

In 2008 I gave birth to my first child, Rawa. My parents still lived in Gaza, so they were very happy. We felt we could overcome all the bad circumstances by supporting each other. We visited each other, exchanged gifts on our birthdays, enjoyed going to the sea, and celebrated the Eid.

We tried to plan a party for my daughter's first birthday. Instead, we had to escape from our home after a nearby explosion. The war planes flew right over our building. Our hearts stopped every time a plane passed above the house we had escaped to. After the cease-fire, we returned home to find all the windows damaged. I thanked God that we were all together; no one was missing. Most families lost either their homes or family members.

I experienced a different kind of loss, as members of my family began to leave Gaza, impelled by the dream of achieving their ambitions. My brother Iyad traveled to Egypt to get his master's degree and then his PhD in political science. My second brother, Abdullah, studied economics in Cairo, and my father gained his doctorate in religion. Of course, it wasn't easy for my father to stay there without my mum, so she followed him to Cairo, after extreme difficulties in arranging to cross the border. Then my sisters Doaa and Alaa and my brother Fakher joined them in Egypt.

It wasn't easy for me to accept and adjust to their absence. I cried for a long time when I was alone, without letting others notice. We used Egyptian cellphone cards to call each other. Because I live close to the Egyptian-Palestinian border, the connection is better there than in the center of Rafah. But our voices are interrupted many times, so I go up on the roof for a better connection.

Days and years passed slowly, and I couldn't bear experiencing Ramadan, Al-Eid, Mother's Day, and many other occasions without my family. These holidays ached my heart, as other women celebrated with their families, whereas I stayed at home wearing a beautiful dress and

taking photos to send to my family. At night I cried when everyone was asleep.

Finally, I called Iyad to ask him to return with my parents and siblings, because I couldn't live like that. I shouted at him and cried: "Iyad! I know you can convince my parents to come back. Please, enough is enough. You deprived me of you very early in my life. I still need you. Please come back." Iyad talked with me a long time and tried to convince me that life leads everyone in a specific way. Each person grows up and continues in his or her way. "Don't worry, we will be back for sure, inshallah." Iyad ended the call with this promise.

Safety Is Like Asking for the Moon

My closest brother, Hasan, stayed here in Gaza. He became my family, there with a warm hug whenever I needed to gain the strength to face problems. I was supposed to be strong enough to be responsible for myself, but I became anxious as the birth of my second child approached. I needed my mum's support, like any girl facing the pain of delivery. Although many people surrounded me, no one could replace my mum. But she couldn't come because it was too difficult to cross the border. So, I felt a mixture of happiness and sadness, giving birth in the absence of my mum. Unfortunately, when my sadness and happiness meet each other, sadness overcomes happiness.

Another war broke out in Gaza in 2014, after settlers kidnapped and burned to death a Palestinian teenager who lived in Jerusalem. Hasan was alone in the family house. I was mad that he refused to come to my house. The Israeli soldiers blew up the house next door to him. The strong explosion damaged the windows, walls, and furniture of our family home. Hasan tried to escape but was blocked by the fire raging in the street. Later, he managed to join us. But then explosions near my house forced us to leave. We had to walk separately because the Israeli military threatened us by telephone: they told us we must not stay at home and must not walk in

groups. A scary and fearful situation. We nearly lost our minds from the terrifying bombs. This was the worst war against Gaza. When the fighting ended, it left behind damaged souls, broken hearts, and massive destruction.

Hasan stayed in Gaza until he graduated as a civil engineer. Like most of the ambitious youths living here, he wanted to develop his life and improve himself as well as discover the outside world. So he decided to travel to Germany to realize his dreams.

He worked hard to get a German visa and then an Israeli travel permit. But his visa expired before he could leave, because Israel had closed the border between Gaza and Egypt. Finally, he was able to travel after Germany issued another visa. His departure was the strongest emotional shock for me.

Gaza is unlike anywhere else in the world. When someone leaves Gaza to fulfill their future, it's impossible to think about coming back. Not only Hasan but also most of the ambitious youths living here believe that they have no future in Gaza, where problems have become increasingly complicated and almost impossible to solve.

My Children's Worlds

I don't want my children to face and witness bad days like I did as a child, so I try to seize each beautiful event in order to leave them with happy memories.

We planned to celebrate Rawa's first birthday on January 6, 2009. We brought her a white dress and balloons as well as gifts for the other children. And we planned to buy a delicious chocolate cake. Although Israel was bombing Gaza, we decided we should enjoy our firstborn baby's special day and take many photos.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned before, we didn't do any of that. On that day, Israeli troops targeted our neighborhood and we had to leave the house. We went to a relative's house—a big house with a very big garden. Many people crowded into the house, gathering for shelter and to follow news of

the escalating attacks. We watched the news on our mobile phones as, most of the time, there was no electricity and so we couldn't watch TV. We all slept in one room.

The host family was very generous and even prepared different kinds of desserts. Rawa enjoyed playing with the other kids during lulls in the fighting. But when fighter jets flew overhead or houses were targeted, we gathered the kids with us in the living room. After the war ended, we returned home and repaired the house. We then celebrated both our survival and Rawa's birthday.

We worked hard to help our children create happy memories. In 2012 my husband and I traveled to Egypt with my three daughters and my parents-in-law because my father-in-law required a sensitive operation. My daughters ranged from eight months to five years old. It was the first time that they traveled such a long distance by car. Although it took eight hours to reach my family, we didn't feel the passage of time because we were fascinated by the sights—the Sinai desert, Suez Canal, and finally 6th of October City, outside Cairo. We were like birds in a cage who finally can reach the sky and take pleasure in flapping our wings. We flew straight through the different places, not caring about the length of the trip. When the driver asked if we would like to rest in a restaurant, we refused. I not only was pleased to leave Gaza for the first time in my life, but also had a burning desire to meet my family in Egypt as soon as possible. I hadn't seen my mother for eight months. And it had been four years since I saw my father and my siblings. I wished that we had an airport in Gaza, so we could fly instead of drive.

My father saw my daughters for the first time. He enjoyed playing with them and even took them to the zoo, which was totally different from the simple, small zoo in Rafah. My daughters played with elephants and saw giraffes, lions and cubs, a big lake for geese, and a pond for fish. They were dazzled by the many kinds of animals and birds, which they had only seen on TV. My children were over the moon, running everywhere laughing. The oldest—Rawa and Rahaf—asked many questions about the animals, while Maram—the youngest—just pointed at things and laughed. We took many

photos wherever we went, because we knew that, when the children grew up, these photos would create beautiful memories of their childhood and would foster a sense of pleasure and optimism.

When we had to return to Gaza, we said goodbye to my family with broken hearts, not knowing when we could meet again. Fortunately, I returned to Cairo five years later. But I was alone. As my husband couldn't travel with me, it wasn't safe for me to take my (by then) five children on such a long journey.

The Impact of the 2014 War

During the war on Gaza in 2014, my children witnessed the fighting alongside me. Unfortunately, I wasn't strong enough or brave enough to hide my fears in front of them. It was a horrible war, and I feared that I would lose my life or my children's lives at any moment. I wanted to live so that my children would not suffer and miss me, and I was also afraid of missing my children should they be killed. I felt and understood my mother's fear of death during the clashes of the *intifada*s (uprisings) when I was a child. I wished my mother was with me for support. Then, maybe I could be braver. I felt like a child who needed her mother, more than a mother of five kids. But I thanked Allah that my parents weren't living in their house in 2014: when the Israeli military forces targeted the neighbor's house, they also damaged my parents' house, including their bedroom.

After the war ended, my children kept causing each other trouble. When one created a shape with blocks, another swooped in like a drone and damaged that shape. Then they shouted and beat each other. It wasn't easy to resolve their conflicts. They also played the roles of Israeli soldiers and Palestinians. They divided themselves into two groups and shot and beat each other. It was a crazy time. It took a lot of time to get them to change their way of playing. I know that whatever I did to calm them, the fear and horrible nights during the war would be stuck in their memory.

One day we drove to the northern part of the Gaza Strip, to change our mood and visit their aunt. When we passed near the Gaza harbor, we saw many small ships. When Rawa asked where the ships go, I answered: “The Israelis allow us to sail in the sea for a specific distance in order to fish.”

She then asked, “Why do Israelis attack us and decide how far we can go by ship?” My daughter reminded me of myself when I was her age. I had similar questions, but no satisfactory answers.

“Israel stole our land and occupied us many years ago, and now they fight and kill us because we elected Hamas to govern us, and Israel hates Hamas,” I explained.

“Why did they steal our lands and occupy us? And why do they hate Hamas?” she wondered out loud.

I had had the same kinds of questions, but I didn’t have the answers because my parents thought that I was too young to understand my surroundings. I believed that I had to answer Rawa’s questions, because I’m sure that she is intelligent and aware enough to understand what is happening. We had a long discussion, which ended with talking about Gaza’s border crossings, a subject that she had already learned about in school.

My son Mahmoud is also learning from his daily experiences. For example, when COVID-19 attacked Gaza, the Palestinian police went onto the streets to manage people’s movements in order to prevent crowds and stem the spread of the virus. On one Friday, there was a complete lockdown, with police stationed in front of our house. Their uniforms, way of walking, and the movement of their jeeps reminded me of the Israeli soldiers who prevented us from going outdoors. After all those years, I couldn’t forget them.

While Mahmoud was cleaning under the trees outside the garden, an officer called to him. Mahmoud thought the officer would arrest him, so he hid under the trees. When the officer called again, he saw the officer smile and so he went up to the officer, also smiling. The officer asked his name and asked what he was doing.

Mahmoud said, “I’m cleaning outside the garden.”

“Why today?” the officer asked. “You know there’s a lockdown.”

“We clean every day.”

The officer laughed and told him to go home after he finished. Mahmoud ran to us, laughing and telling us everything. He added: “He’s a very kind officer. I was afraid the first time he called to me, but when I saw him smile, I wasn’t afraid and went to him.”

I told my son, “As long as you don’t make mistakes, never be afraid of any officer. Be brave.”

Since then, Mahmoud has admired these officers. He is also very close to his father, who’s an architectural engineer. When we ask him about his future, he says: “I would like to be an engineer and also a police officer who has weapons to fight evil and protect people.” When I asked, “What about a weapons engineer?” he laughed: “Yes! That’s what I want.” When we asked my daughters, the first three responded: doctor, engineer, and doctor. But the youngest said: “I want to be a bride!” We all laughed at her, and she laughed too.

Let Us Dream

I don’t claim that I’m a model mother. I know I have bad habits and behavior that I should change and correct. However, I remember what I lived through in comparison with my children, and I do my best so they will not face the same troubles and ambiguities. I’m like any mother who wishes that her children will have a better present and future.

Every one of my children has a dream she or he wishes to achieve. I’m sure that their present will affect their perspective on their future in significant ways.

I wish to witness the miracle of the liberation of all our occupied lands. Then, I can go to our home villages with our children so they can feel where they originate and belong and feel ownership of their homeland. I

hope to erase the word “refugee” from their vocabulary, because this word is full of disappointment and weakness. They will go to every place in our country. They will see the beautiful places on the West Bank, without fear from armed soldiers, and will have peace of mind without being restricted in their movements inside and outside our ancestral land. They will discover those places by themselves and will live the adventure of traveling to new places such as cities and forests. Gaza doesn’t have mountains or forests, so we have never gone on safari and enjoyed the glory of nature. My children dream of playing in the snow and making snowmen, as they’ve seen on TV. We have amazing cold weather on the West Bank. It isn’t far from us, but Israel prevents us from going there and enjoying the snow with our children. I also want to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

I want to see the end of the Gaza blockade so that I can take my children to Egypt to visit my family. I dream of gathering with my parents, my brother and sister who live with them, and my brother Iyad, who lives in Egypt with his four children. In my dream, my two brothers who live in Gaza will join us for the reunion, and also my brother in Germany and my sister in Kuwait, with her three children.

With the end of the blockade, we will travel to many countries and get to know various cultures, all over the world. We will expand beyond our small circle of acquaintances and experience new, useful practices and ideas that we can bring back home to develop our society.

For example, my husband is an architectural engineer. He learns about modern designs by studying international engineering practices, but he can’t travel to workshops in other countries. He designs beautiful buildings, using the materials available in Gaza. Unfortunately, his professional craft suffers because of the deteriorating economy. There isn’t enough funding to work on projects that satisfy his curiosity and creativity. With the end of the blockade, he could create new projects and partner with international businesses. He could help to decrease unemployment and usher in a renaissance of creativity and professional exploration.

Besides that, my children will have better-quality education. At school, there are more than forty students in each class, and most schools don’t have purified water for the children to drink. In the future, we will build schools, ensure healthy water, and provide jobs for the currently unemployed teachers.

My children will be able to travel to study in any country they want and come back with new knowledge, technology, and experience to develop and improve our Palestine. Rawa dreams of studying medicine in Turkey. Rahaf dreams of studying engineering in Germany. I hope to have my own NGO, which will help other women improve themselves, enhance women’s empowerment in Palestine, and establish cooperation with international institutions. Then our ambitious plans and projects will connect us to the outside world as well as to an open and free Palestine. All these things amount to innumerable dreams and wishes, which are ever present in our minds and conversation.

Seagulls fly around fishing boats near the Gaza Sea Port. January 28, 2016. Photo: Sameh Rahmi

Gaza 2050: Three Scenarios

Basman Aldirawi

The Nakba means “the Catastrophe,” the expulsion of Palestinian people from their original land by Israel beginning in 1948. Since then, the Israeli occupation has taken different shapes and forms.

The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli occupation since 1967. Although Israel unilaterally dismantled its settlements and evacuated the settlers and Israeli army in 2005, the occupation continues in a new form—the blockade over the entire Gaza Strip. The Israeli military has assaulted the Strip multiple times since then, killing thousands of Palestinian civilians and destroying the infrastructure, over and over. Despite the 2005 withdrawal, the United Nations, international human rights organizations, and many legal scholars regard the Gaza Strip as still under Israel’s military occupation.

Since that withdrawal, Israel has continued its direct external control over Gaza and indirect control over life within Gaza. It controls Gaza’s air and maritime space, and six of Gaza’s seven land crossings. It maintains a no-go buffer zone that extends into Gaza and controls the Palestinian population registry. Gaza depends on Israel for water, electricity, telecommunications, and other utilities.

As of 2021, more than two million people live in the 365-square-kilometer area: perhaps the most overpopulated, crowded place in the world. Israel’s attacks on the sole electricity generating station cause an acute shortage of electricity. Water is undrinkable and dangerous to people’s health. Gaza has one of the world’s highest rates of poverty and

unemployment because of Israeli restrictions, its blockade, and the destruction of factories, farms, and homes.

In a 2015 report on assistance to the Palestinian people, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development warned that the Gaza Strip could become “uninhabitable” by 2020 if current economic trends persist.[1] Now, we are in 2021 and nothing has changed. To be honest, Gaza was uninhabitable even before that.

What will Gaza look like in 2050?

I imagine three possible futures for Gaza: the no-solution scenario, the two-state solution scenario, and the one-state solution scenario.

The No-Solution Scenario

It’s July 2050, one of Gaza’s hottest months ever. I didn’t sleep well last night due to the heat and lack of electricity. I couldn’t switch on a fan or an air conditioner. I still live at my parents’ house as I don’t have enough money to buy my own house or the salary required to rent one. I can’t see the street from the window, as I used to. The new buildings that crowd next to the house block my view.

Gaza has been assaulted numerous times since 2021. Many people have died and many others were injured. Yet, the Gaza Strip now is the most densely populated place in the world with around ten million people. Agriculture was the backbone of our already weak economy, but the increase in population has drastically decreased the amount of green space.

I still work as a physiotherapist at the Ministry of Health. The medical situation is worse and more fragile because of the rapid population increase and Israel’s continuous attacks on Gaza. In 2050, the Gaza Strip still has the same number of government hospitals as in 2021: thirteen hospitals with less than two thousand beds. That is very low for ten million people. With the blockade, which has lasted for more than forty years, there is a shortage of medical equipment. The government can’t afford to build more hospitals

or provide more supplies. And Israel continues to prevent many essential drugs and supplies from entering Gaza. As a result, many people can't find the needed medical treatment. And travel to medical facilities outside the Strip is almost impossible, as it was in 2021.

The Palestinians in Gaza have voted in several elections since 2021. The current government has tried to improve the supply of electricity and water and enhance employment. Yet, with the blockade, there can't be real change.

Yesterday, I called my Palestinian friend in Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon. He is still searching for a job. Banned from working outside the camp, he must rely on UN aid. He still dreams of visiting his original city, Haifa, one day.

The Israelis rejected my latest application to visit Jerusalem. They gave my mother permission but refused mine. Yet, she can't go by herself. She is old and she needs someone to accompany her.

Gaza has two borders with two crossing to the outside world. Erez crosses into Israel and Rafah connects to Egypt. Both have never been controlled by Palestinians. When you travel through those crossings, the meaning of time changes. Time is always extended: what is supposed to take minutes extends to hours and even days. After more than seventy years of ongoing occupation, it is hard to ask a Palestinian: What is time?

I don't know if it was unlucky for the request to visit Jerusalem to be rejected without explanation, or lucky not to go through the humiliating hours, hours, and hours that travelers face.

I spend my dark, hot airless night with no electricity thinking, When is our ongoing Nakba going to end? When will Israel seriously care about a real solution? When will the international community use actions instead of words, standing for what it proclaims? When will the no-state solution end? How will Gaza look in another ten years?

The Two-State-Solution Scenario

The two-state solution means that we now have an independent State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel. The miraculous withdrawal of settlements on the West Bank finally happened as a result of the continuous pressure of the Palestinian resistance along with the international community. And the Gaza Strip has the same borders as in 2005, when Israel withdrew its settlements. Nonetheless, Palestinians are tired. They were forced to accept a state encompassing only 22 percent of their original land, and they have not gained the right to return to their pre-1948 homes. This leaves the Palestinian refugees in other Arab countries in limbo. Because of the bad situation facing refugees in Lebanon, my friend in Ein el-Hilweh has moved to the new Palestinian state. Some other refugees also resettled in Gaza and the West Bank, whereas others feel the situation is still unfair and remain abroad.

An important ongoing problem is the status of Palestinians who live inside Israel. If the two-state solution means that Israel is a state for Jewish people, what will happen to the non-Jewish people who remained there in 1948? Will they remain Israeli citizens in accordance with their place of residence, or will their ethnicity dictate that they be expelled to the new Palestinian state? The Israeli government is placing more pressure on the Palestinian citizens, by new rules that reinforce the privileges of Jewish citizens over Palestinians.

It’s July 2050. Gaza is suffering through one of the hottest summers. But Gaza has better facilities than in 2021. The Palestinian government rebuilt and expanded the electricity station, which improved the electricity supply. I can sleep now under the air conditioner without worrying.

I still live with my mother at her house. The economy is too brittle. I still can’t have my own house.

The medical situation in Gaza has improved with the increasing number of hospitals, but there is still a shortage in medical equipment and supplies as Israel still blocks their entry, claiming that they could be used for military purposes. I am still a physiotherapist at the Ministry of Health in Gaza.

Owing to Israel's claim of the need for self-defense, we continue to live under many restrictions. Gaza is separated from Jerusalem and the West Bank by Israel, and there are still major travel obstacles. Although Israel is heavily armed and Palestine is disarmed, Israel continues to assert its needs to restrict the movement of trade and people. Many essential materials are banned from entering Gaza due to Israel's claim that the Palestinian government will use them to manufacture weapons. Supposedly, we are two independent states, but the reality favors Israel. We have our own airport and seaport, but Israel still imposes restrictions over their use, citing the need to maintain security as its excuse.

I sit at the end of the day under the air conditioner, thinking about Beersheba, my family's original home, that's part of Israel, no longer my land. The two-state reality in 2050 seems unstable and unsatisfactory. I think about my friends here in Gaza: Will we be able to see our land? Will we be able to move without new restrictions? Will we live in a disarmed state while Israel has the right to remain armed? Will our right to defend ourselves ever be the same as Israel's? What about the Palestinians who live in historical Palestine, under Israeli rule?

The One-State-Solution Scenario

I imagine that only this solution can give Palestinians their full basic rights. What is the one-state solution? It enables both Palestinians and Israelis to live in one democratic secular state where everyone has equal rights and is free to practice his or her beliefs.

Israelis claimed that Palestinians would be a demographic threat under the one-state solution, as Jews would become the minority. But equal rights are the solution that guarantees the most rights and protections for all. After all, Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together peacefully in Palestine in the past. And, after 1948, Christians, who are a minority compared with Muslims, lived peacefully together with Muslims.

It’s July 2050, one of the hottest summers ever in Gaza. I live in Beersheba now, my family’s original city, but I often travel to Gaza where my mother still lives. She decided to stay in Gaza. She owns a house there and is used to the atmosphere of Gaza. Yet she comes to visit from time to time. There is no military checkpoint and no apartheid wall. Travel between the two cities takes only one hour, not the many humiliating hours we endured when we lived under occupation and separation. I work now as a physiotherapist at a new hospital in Beersheba.

Gaza has all the infrastructure and facilities that it needs: fresh water, electricity, and natural gas. The employment rate increases as agriculture improves and farmers no longer fear Israeli bombs. There is free movement of imports and exports and of industrial goods. Also, the population of Gaza has decreased as many refugees returned to live on their original land. There’s a new geographical distribution. My friend returned to Haifa and works as a teacher at one of the government schools.

The medical situation in Gaza is at its finest, with an adequate number of facilities for the population as well as ample supplies and equipment. People no longer need to travel for medical treatment or die waiting to get permission from Israeli officers.

Democratic elections take place every four years. We are now preparing for a new legislative election. Palestinian and Jewish citizens elect representatives together. Electoral lists feature candidates from different backgrounds, religions, and ideologies. The atmosphere is democratic. There are diverse political, social, and religious views, and everyone respects others’ views and beliefs. I call this “normal diversity”: no group is superior to the other.

We have both an airport and a seaport. We don’t have to struggle at crossings. We can simply visit, move, and travel to any other city or country. Gaza lives like any other place in the world with opportunities for development and production. Palestine lives like any other country within the range of acceptable normal diversity. Each citizen is a first-class citizen, and everyone has equal rights.

What Does Gaza Really Need for the Future?

Simply, Gaza needs to live like any other place in the world. Gaza needs to be liberated to achieve that. Gazans need to have full rights, especially the right to have a future. Palestinian refugees in Gaza need to practice their simple right to return to their own cities and villages. Gaza needs to be less crowded, not more overcrowded. Gaza needs green spaces. Gaza needs electricity and water. Palestinians in Gaza need to travel easily without being banned, restricted, or humiliated. Gaza needs a better economy, educational system, and health system, not fragile ones with massive supply shortages. Gaza needs infrastructure. Palestinians need to live without the ongoing threat of Israeli attacks. They need to sleep without the buzzing of drones that spy on their lives.

The future is vague and scary for all Palestinians inside and outside Gaza. Israel increases its blockade, bombing Gaza every few years. The population inside Gaza grows as well, which means an escalating humanitarian crisis. But what can we do to achieve a real solution?

No magic wand has yet existed to serve as a solution. Humanitarian aid shows no results—it's a proven failure. It just perpetuates the same cycle of crisis and injustice. Gaza needs much more than that. Gaza needs a real solution.

How to find a solution for Gaza?

If you sit in your living room watching TV and someone comes and kicks you out of your own house, who is responsible to find a solution?

It's not the responsibility of the occupied to find a solution to their occupation; rather, this is the responsibility of the occupier. Moreover, strong pressure is needed from the international community and human rights organizations.

But only coexistence under equal rights—the one-state solution—can give the Palestinians their rights. Palestinians don't need just any solution. What Palestinians need is a fair solution with full rights, full human rights.

The problem is Israel, whose government claims it supports a two-state solution but keeps increasing settlements, restrictions, and blockades. After

nearly three-quarters of a century of occupation, Israel does nothing to solve the problem but instead deepens its occupation and its consequences.

What Palestinians need is for everyone to assume their responsibility. The international community and human rights organizations should exert real pressure, stop criticizing Palestinian resistance, and endorse the right of defense against Israel's offensive and destructive use of force. Stop equating the occupied with the occupier. Put pressure on Israel to assume its responsibility and solve the Palestinian Nakba that it created.

The problem is Israel, which is responsible for Palestinians' ongoing Nakba and the lack of a solution to the Palestinian struggle.

What does the future hold for Gaza? We Palestinians don't know, but we still hope everyone will assume their responsibilities. Still hope for a better tomorrow. Still wish for a real solution, not the "no solution" still being implemented after so many years.

In sum, Gaza needs the ongoing Nakba to end. Gaza needs life.

Palestinian boys carry a beach umbrella at the beach in Gaza City. February 7, 2018. Photo: Ezz Al-Zanoun

A Rose Shoulders Up*

Mosab Abu Toha

Don’t ever be surprised
to see a rose shoulder up
among the ruins of the house:
This is how we survived.

In Arabic:

وردة تبزُغ

لا تتفاجئ أبداً
عندما ترى وردةً تبزغ
بين ركام البيت:
هكذا نجونا.

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* “A Rose Shoulders Up” from *Things You May Find Hidden In My Ear* © 2022 by Mosab Abu Toha, is reprinted with the permission of City Lights Books, citylights.com.

Notes

Introduction

1. Helga Tawil-Souri and Dina Matar, eds., *Gaza as Metaphor* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2016), 87-88.
2. Tawil-Souri and Matar, *Gaza as Metaphor*, 90-91.
3. This metaphor is from Ghassan Kanafani's 1962 novel *Men in the Sun*, the story of a group of Palestinian refugees who travel across the dessert in search for livelihood in a Gulf country. They are smuggled across borders in a metal tanker, during which the men die from the heat and lack of oxygen. When the driver discovers that his passengers have died, he wonders, "Why did not they knock on the walls of the tanker?" This has become a popular metaphor in contemporary Palestinian discourse—especially in reference to the need for reclaiming collective agency, and that the people's existence, or life, depends on disrupting the unjust status quo through resistance and uprising, or "knocking on the walls of the tanker." Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999).
4. The two-state framework is both a cause and a symptom of the fragmentation of the Palestinian body politic. The leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization entered the peace process —at the center of which is the two-state framework—without the consent of the Palestinians it claims to represent. As a result, the source of legitimacy for the PLO ceased to rely on democratic representation of the wishes and demands of the Palestinian people. Instead, the PLO elite, which would later on lead the Palestinian Authority, would derive their legitimacy from subscribing to an internationally imposed political process, rather than a genuine representation of the Palestinian people's ambitions.
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On Why We Still Hold Onto Our Phones and Keep Recording

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Breaking the Vicious Cycle of Permanent Temporality

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2. According to Charlie Hailey, “Camps exist between the temporary and the permanent. From the outset, camps are understood as having a limited, although sometimes indeterminate, duration. . . . In spite of this sometimes contractual impermanence, camps remain.” Hailey, *Camps: A Guide to 21st-Century Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 4. Brad Evans offers this explanation of permanent temporality: “Despite its more overt political conations, over the past two decades international organizations and governments have actively used the term ‘refugee’ as the favoured device for contraining populations in sites, which have become permanent residencies. A space of what [Zygmunt] Bauman calls ‘permanent temporality.’” Evans, “Dead in the Waters,” in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, ed. Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 71.
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be vetted to ensure that the beneficiaries have no links to any Palestinian political group. This approach allows humanitarian actors to provide assistance to people in a place where the blockade makes sustainable development impossible. However, this does not meet long-term needs and forces Palestinians to take on menial labor to survive while doing nothing to challenge the situation that leaves them in need.

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Index

Abercrombie Building, 92f, 93
Abu Artema, Ahmed, 5
Abu Beed, Adnan, 173
Abu Sitta, Salman, 51
Abusalim, Dorgham, 12
agriculture
  buffer zones and, 76, 213, 214
  destruction of, 68, 72, 75-77, 81, 214
  fertile land and agricultural practice, 62-63
  and Gaza landscape over time, 63-64
  and Israeli occupation, 75-78
  land, folklore, and, 60-62
  See also peasantry
al-athan, 220. *See also* calls to prayer
al-motaradeen (the chasers), 220
Al-Nuseirat refugee camp, 203-4
Alareer, Tayseer, 18
Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2019, 148
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC/"the Quakers"), 5, 9
  Gaza and, 3-5, 9, 40, 42-43
  Great March of Return and, 4
  United Nations (UN) and, 4, 40, 42, 43
antisemitism, accusations of, 25, 52
AnyVision, 135-36

aquifers, 74, 76
Arab revolt in Palestine (1936-1939). *See* Great Revolt
Arafat, Yasser, 165
architectural engineer, 229, 230
architectural technology, experimenting with, 95-97
architecture, 93, 95, 101
  forensic, 142
  key facts about Gaza and implications for, 88-92
  See also building design
"architecture of the everyday," 91, 97
  lessons learned and, 108-12
Armistice Agreements (1949), 39
arson, 161
artificial intelligence (AI), 129-31
  AI technologies that can be used in Gaza, 141-47
  to assist Palestinian physicians, 147
  as catalyst for liberation, 149-51
  used to oppress Gaza, 131-34
  using AI to improve quality of life, 141-47
Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), 148-49
artificial intelligence (AI) tools, 132, 136, 141, 143
  local companies' role in developing, 146
artistic life in Gaza, 168-69
ASHTAR Theatre, 175-76
automobiles, 125-26

Bakroun, Lewa, 17
Balfour Declaration, 39
Battir, West Bank, 62-63
beach in Gaza City, 58f, 240f
Bedouin communities, 60, 70, 109
Beersheba, 36, 237

Beersheba Prison, 35
blockade of the Gaza Strip (Gaza siege), 131, 139
  aftermath, 119
  impact, 17, 21, 34, 103, 126, 129, 161, 164, 207 (see *also* freedom of movement)
  use of AI to help break the, 148, 150
  using 3D printers to break the siege on equipment, 146-47
  See also under cinema(s)
book exhibits, 163
bookmobiles. *See* libraries: mobile
books
  banning, 165-66
  from Noam Chomsky, 155, 156
  restrictions on the import of, 159-60, 163-64, 181
  smuggled through tunnels, 163
  See also libraries
bookstores, 152f, 180-81
border crossings, 57, 130, 199, 235
  closures, 94, 121, 199
  Egypt–Gaza, 187, 205-7, 224 (see *also* Rafah Border Crossing)
border protests (2018-2019). *See* Great March of Return
Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS), 23, 52
Breer (village), 217-19
Britain, 39, 65-67, 167. *See also* Mandate for Palestine
buffer zones, 76, 213, 214, 233 and agriculture, 76, 213, 214
Buheiry, Marwan R., 73
building design, 87, 100f, 102f, 105f-7f
  building(s) in a crisis and healing wounds, 92-94
  design phase, 101-4
  implications for the future, 110-12
  project simplicity and cost efficiency, 104-5, 107-8
  repairing damaged homes, 97-99, 99f, 100f

See also architecture; reconstruction in Gaza
building materials
accessibility and quality, 95
scarcity, 94-95
Burayr, 67
"bus number 11" (walking), 125

Cairo, 198
Cairo International Airport, 187, 198, 200
calls to prayer *(al-athan)*, 197-98, 220
candles, 120, 123, 127
deaths from fire caused by, 121
cars, racing, 125-26
Cast Lead, Operation, 18-20, 137
Catholic Relief Services, 96
cease-fires, 157, 158, 194, 199
censorship, 69
of artistic expression, 173
of print media, 159-60, 167
of social media, 139, 140
checkpoints
Egyptian, 186
Israeli, 213 *(see also under* books)
childhood memories, miserable, 218-19
Chomsky, Noam, 155, 156, 177
books from, 155, 156, 159
cinema(s)
Egypt and, 170-72
between occupation, Islamism, and siege, 169-73
Palestinian cinema movement of revolution (1968-82), 50
COVID-19 pandemic, 135, 228
"Cyber-Dome," 139

cyberspace, Palestinian, 148, 149
combating, 138-41
surveillance of, 134
cycle of crisis and injustice, 239
cycle of settler–colonial violence, perpetual, 33

darkened homes under lit sky, 122-23
darkness, 118
the ABC's of, 123-24
a city that masters, 118-19
hearing better in the dark, 123
See also electricity; power outages
Darwish, Mahmoud, 47
Day of Judgment, 185, 195-96
demolitions. *See* homes: destruction of demonstrations, x, 49, 84f, 219, 222
2021 protests in Jerusalem, 2-3, 140
See also Great March of Return; Land Day
Diana Tamari Library, 162
Dickens, Charles, 21
digital age, 130-31. *See also* cyberspace
"digital occupation" of Gaza, 130
digital siege, employing, 131, 137-38
disengagement, 235. *See also* Gaza Strip:
Israeli "disengagement" from
Dome of the Rock, 218, 230
dramatic arts, training in, 174
dreams, 81, 179, 180, 223, 225
children's worlds and, 225-27
let us dream, 229-31
safety is like asking for the moon, 224-25
See also Gaza Strip: possible futures for; right of return
drones, 180

suppressing through drone technology, 136-37
dual use materials, 130

education, 163, 164, 214-15, 230
artificial intelligence (AI) and, 150
portion of educated people in Gaza, 178, 215
university, 160, 174 (see *also* Islamic University in Gaza)
See also schools
Edward Said Public Library, 156-58
Egypt, 185-86, 198, 217
cinema and, 170-72
travel to and from, 185, 186, 200, 224, 226
tunnels to, 163
Egypt–Gaza border crossings, 187, 199, 205-7, 224. *See also* Rafah Border Crossing
Egyptian military checkpoints, 186
Egyptian occupation of Gaza, 39, 167
electricity, 54, 115-16
an ode to bread and, 120-21
defining, 118
lessons about, 117-21
living without, 119
nature of, 119
number of hours a day without, 115, 118, 120, 121
politics of, 117
See also darkness; power outages; power plant
electricity crisis, 115, 121, 126
environment
befallen *(see* agriculture: and Israeli occupation)
Palestinian identity and, 64
environmental Nakba, 67-68
environmental preservation initiatives, 68

ethnic cleansing, 45, 48, 51
  during Nakba, 33, 38, 44, 45, 67
European refugee crisis, 40
Evans, Brad, 243n2
expansion, territorial, 8, 39, 42, 43, 65

facial recognition technology, surveilling through, 135-36
fair warning. *See* roof knocking
farmers, Palestinian, 18, 41, 61, 65, 72-74, 79-82
  finances, 70-71, 73-75, 82
  history, 70
  Nakba and, 67-71
  photograph of, 58f
  relationship with the land, 67-68, 72-74
  violence against, 18, 214
  See also agriculture; peasantry
fence, electric. *See* Gaza–Israel barrier
"fifty-one day war." *See* Operation Protective Edge
film, 50, 169. *See also* cinema(s)
fire
  arson, 161
  caused by candles, 121
  See also candles
fishing, buffer zones and, 214
fishing boats, 214, 232f flag, Palestinian, x, 32f, 84f
Floyd, George, 28f
folklore, land, and agriculture, 60-61
Forensic Architecture, 142
Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 49, 34
freedom of movement
  and medical care, 147, 199, 207, 209, 213, 234, 238
  and the ongoing Nakba, 212

Oslo Accords and, vii, 213
See also blockade of the Gaza Strip; border crossings; permit regime

"Gaza: Reimagining the Boundaries of Possibility" (AFSC), 9
Gaza border protests (2018-2019). *See* Great March of Return
Gaza City, 2, 94, 120, 157, 163, 167
beach, 58f, 240f
a city that masters darkness, 118-19
Gaza landscape over time, 63-64
Gaza siege. *See* blockade of the Gaza Strip; digital siege
Gaza Strip
characterizations of, 1, 64, 88, 186
conditions in, 1, 25-26, 124, 233
defying oppression through initiatives, 173-76
demographics, 88-89, 158, 160
population, 8-9, 78, 88, 89, 213, 233, 234
population growth, 9, 39, 63, 70, 78-79, 124, 234, 237
education and literacy, 178
ending the suffering in, 206-11
as "exporter of oranges and short stories," 166
history and political origins, 9, 64
Israeli capture of, 212
Israeli "disengagement" from, 47-48, 223, 233, 235
Israel's strategies to control, 134-41
key facts about, 88-89
possible futures for, 25, 125, 234-39
daring to envision a future, 177-80
a just future as possibility vs. mirage, 78-81
what Gaza needs for the future, 238-39
See also dreams; two-state solution
significance of, 154-55
stories of, 18-20

See also specific topics
Gaza Unlocked campaign, 5
Gaza War (2008-2009). *See* Operation Cast Lead
Gaza War (2014). *See* Operation Protective Edge
Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine (Alareer), 20
Gaza–Israel barrier (electric fence), x, 32f, 37, 39-40, 48
Geneva Conventions, 34
Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange, 34
Gisha (human rights organization), 208
"golden times" of Gaza blurred, 72-75
grassroots movements, 52
Great March of Return (Great Return March), 4, 5, 48, 49, 137, 142, 147, 212
Great Revolt (1936-1939 Arab revolt in Palestine), 66, 67
role of peasantry in, 64-67
guns, 197

Hailey, Charlie, 243n2
homeland(s), 124, 144-45
forbidden, 217-18
See also right of return
homes
destruction of, 87, 89-90, 94, 154, 158, 162-63, 192, 193
repairing damaged, 97-99, 99f-100f
See also building design
housing crisis, 91-92, 94, 111
building(s) in a crisis and healing wounds, 92-94
humanitarian aid, 96-97, 111, 117, 238-39, 249n1
from UNRWA, 38, 40, 43, 91, 95 (see *also* UNRWA)

See also American Friends Service Committee; building design; housing crisis; humanitarianism and imperialism; Islamic Relief Palestine
humanitarian cease-fires, 194, 199. *See also* cease-fires
humanitarianism and imperialism, Palestinians' encounter with Western, 38-44

illness, 191, 200. *See also* medical care
imperialism, 38, 54
  Palestinians' encounter with Western humanitarianism and, 38-45
imports, restrictions on, 176
  books, 159-60, 163-64, 181
  construction materials, 130
Independence Day, 221
Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 133, 254n7
international aid. *See* humanitarian aid International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 134-35
intifadas (uprisings). *See* Great Revolt; Second Intifada; Unity
Intifada Intifidat al-Wihda, 2-3
Iqra' Bookstore, 181
Islamic Relief Palestine (IRPAL), 97, 101, 108-12
Islamic University in Gaza (IUG), 18, 21-23
  2014 bombing of, 20, 23
Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement, 39
Israeli Independence Day. *See* Independence Day
Israeli siege. *See* blockade of the Gaza Strip; digital siege
Israel–Palestine crisis (2021). *See* May 2021 aggression
Italian Complex building, 176
  painting on the walls of a destroyed building, 176

Jabali, Ali al-, 176
Jabra, Jabra I., 44
Jerusalem, 33-35, 167
  2021 protests in, 2-3, 140

permission to enter, 207, 235
Jewish National Fund (JNF), 43-44, 66
Jews portrayed in classic literature, 21-22
journalism in Gaza, 167-68
Judgment Day. *See* Day of Judgment

Kanafani, Ghassan, 4, 45, 49, 124, 242n3
on Great March of Return, 4
"Letter from Gaza," 46-47
Kapeliouk, Amnon, 35
Karim Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom border crossing, 130, 207
Kayyali, Abd al-Wahhab al-, 65
Kerem Shalom/Karim Abu Salem border crossing, 130, 207
Khalid (Abu Tariq's son), 120, 122, 123

land
confiscation, 62-65, 68, 69 (see *also* Land Day)
See also agriculture; environment; farmers; Great Revolt
Land Day, 48, 69
annual commemoration and protests, 48, 221-22 (see *also* Great March of Return)
no chance to celebrate, 221-22
land purchases, 73
Jewish, 65, 66
Last Judgment. *See* Day of Judgment
Lebdah, Samir Abu, 161
"Letter from Gaza" (Kanafani), 46-47
librarians, 158, 164
libraries, 164
mobile, 163
public, 160-62, 164
Edward Said Public Library, 156-58

visitors, 162, 164
schools and, 157-58, 175
Lieberman, Avigdor, 48-49
“Light at the End of the Tunnel” (art exhibition), 119
literature in Gaza, 21-23, 166, 182t. *See also* books; libraries
live maps. *See* maps, live
loess soil, 63

Ma’bar Rafah. *See* Rafah Border Crossing
Mandate for Palestine, 65-67, 167. *See also* Britain
Mansour Bookstore. *See* Samir Mansour Bookstore
maps, live
to rekindle passion of Palestinians in refugee camps and diaspora, 143-45
used to trace changes on ground, 141-43
Maslow, Abraham, 117
May 2021 aggression (2021 Israel–Palestine crisis), 2-3, 81-82, 152f, 157
cease-fire, 157, 158
protests in Jerusalem, 2-3, 140
media. *See* books; censorship; cinema(s); literature in Gaza
medical care, 16, 191, 213
AI to assist Palestinian physicians, 147
freedom of movement, permits, and, 147, 199, 207, 209, 213, 234, 238
in Gaza, 234, 238
medical equipment and supplies, 147
shortages in, 147, 234, 236
Merchant of Venice, The (Shakespeare), 21-22
Microsoft, 135-36, 139
military robots and sensor technologies, 137-38
missiles
Gazan, 133
Israeli, 19, 20, 132, 137, 191-93
movement. *See* freedom of movement

murals, 28f, 128f, 216f
Muzaien, Khalil al-, 170-71

Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe), 2, 7, 44, 64, 233
  aftermath, 40, 43
  anniversary, 3
  consequences, 2, 33, 44-45, 67-68, 204
  farmers and the, 67-71
  and the Gaza Strip, 2, 9, 25-26, 34, 40
  ongoing, 7-8, 34, 235, 239
    travel restrictions and the, 212
  of people, peasantry, and environment, 67-68
Nakba Day. *See* Independence Day
Nasrallah, Ibrahim, 215
nationalism, Palestinian, 65, 66, 69, 71
  censorship of *(see* censorship)
newspapers in Gaza after the Mandate until 1967 War, 182t
no-state solution/no-solution scenario, 234-35
Nuseirat Camp. *See* Al-Nuseirat refugee camp

occupation of Gaza, 233
Egyptian *(see* Egyptian occupation of Gaza)
  "we live above occupation and not under it," 215
  See also specific topics
occupation of West Bank. *See under* West Bank
Odeh, Louay, 34-37
Oliver Twist (Dickens), 21
one-state solution, 237-39
Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009 Gaza War), 19-20
  aftermath, 18, 95, 98
  casualties, 18, 137, 178
Operation Protective Edge (2014 Gaza War), 76, 178, 185

aftermath, 87
Battle of Shuja'iyya, 14f, 24, 175
cease-fire, 194, 199
darkened homes under lit sky, 122-23
impact of, 227-29
casualties, 20, 24, 178, 212, 215
destruction, 14f, 20, 76-77, 89, 115, 153, 161-63, 225
"the haze of those fifty-one days," 201
See also Shuja'iyya, Battle of
Orientalism, 39, 40, 51
Oslo Accords, 36, 47-48, 50
aftermath and ramifications, 36, 37, 47-48, 52-53, 213
movement restrictions, vii, 213
and Palestinian Authority, 53, 213
and permit regime in West Bank, 205, 213

Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), 242n4
Palestinian Authority (PA), 53, 165
Ministry of Culture, 162-64
Oslo Accords and, 53, 213
Palestinian exodus (1948), 39
Palestinian Land Day. *See* Land Day Palestinian revolution, unrealized vision of a, 44-51
setbacks and breakthrough, 51-54
"Paralyzed" (documentary), 75
peasant life, 63, 64, 79
and the rituals of attachment, 68-72
peasantry attacks on peasant identity, 64-67, 73, 79-80
role in Great Revolt, 64-67
periodicals in Gaza after the Mandate until 1967 War, 182t
permanent temporality, 243n2
definition and overview, 33

vicious cycle of, 33, 38, 43
permit regime, Israeli, 205, 206, 208, 214
and medical care, 207, 209, 213, 238
Oslo Accords and, 205, 213
permits for writers, 163
physicians. *See* medical care
place attachment, 59, 61, 82
place attachment theory, 59, 61
poetry, 26, 57, 241
poverty, 72-74, 233
power outages, 93, 114f, 120-21, 126, 127, 178. *See also* darkness; electricity
power plant, 118
destruction of, 115, 178
prayer, calls to *(al-athan)*, 197-98, 220
"Preservation-Dissolution" policy, 75
printers, 3D, 146-47
prisoners, Palestinian, 34-37, 53
protests. *See* demonstrations

Qada Gaza, 63-64, 67, 68, 70, 71
Quakers. *See* American Friends Service Committee

racing cars, 125-26
Rafah Border Crossing, 186-87, 200, 207, 235
closures, 147, 186, 207
waiting to cross, 187, 202f, 207, 235
Ramadan, 140, 200
Rashad Al-Shawwa Center, 173
reconstruction in Gaza, 89
conflict, scarcity of materials, and obstacles to, 94-95
cost of, 95

See also architecture; homes
Red Carpet Human Rights Film Festival, 172, 175
Red Gold, 75-76
refugee camps, 33, 203, 204
live maps to rekindle passion of Palestinians in, 143-45
revenge, 22
right of return, 33, 38-40, 48, 161
hopes and dreams of return, 5, 144, 161
protests and the, 4, 5, 48
technology and, 144, 149, 150
robots, military, 137-38
rocket attacks on Israel, 132, 134
roof knocking, 192, 193

Said, Edward W., 36, 39, 46, 72, 165
Said, Mariam, 157
Said al-Mishal Foundation for Culture and Science, 175
Saif, Atef Abu, 164, 165
Salma (Abu Tariq's daughter), 118, 122-24, 127
worst birthday: the night of November 14, 2011, 119-20
Samir Mansour Bookstore, 152f, 180-81 bombing, 180
Samson's Foxes, 68
Sayigh, Rosemary, 53, 63, 64, 69
schools, 86f, 123-24, 195, 230
Land Day celebrations and, 221
libraries and, 157-58, 175
UNRWA, 49, 96, 158
See also education
scooters, 126
Second Intifada, 17-18, 37, 205, 213
settlers, Israeli, 64, 65. *See also* Gaza
Strip: Israeli "disengagement" from

Shakespeare, William, 21-22
Shalit, Gilad, 34
Shawwa, Rashad Al-, 170
shelling, artillery, 19, 24
Shuja'iyya, 16, 18
  demographics, 24
  Red Carpet Human Rights Film Festival in, 172, 175
Shuja'iyya, Battle of, 14f, 24, 175
siege of Gaza. *See* blockade of the Gaza Strip; digital siege
"Silence for Gaza" (Darwish), 47
smuggling tunnels, 132, 137, 163
soldiers, Israeli, 172, 173, 203, 207, 218-20, 227, 228
  Cheshire-ish smiles from, 16
  children playing the roles of, 227-28
  retaliation against, 222 *(see also* stone-throwing)
  violence perpetrated by, 15, 16, 18, 203-4, 219-21, 225, 227-28
stone-throwing, 16-17, 218-21
strawberries, 75-76
Sursock Purchases, 66
surveillance, 134, 138
  surveilling through facial recognition technology, 135-36
Swedenburg, Ted, 67, 69, 75

Tariq, Abu
  and the politics of electricity, chickens, eggs, and wheat, 117-18
  scene from 2014: darkened homes under lit sky, 122-23
  See also Salma
technologies
colorizing technology to modernize old pictures of Palestine, 145
  keeping up with the latest, 148-49
  preventing Palestinian technical development, 134-35
  See also specific topics

TEDx Shuja'iyya, 175
telecommunications technology, 134-35
temporality, permanent, 33
tires, 126
tourism, 74
tours in Palestine, 144
travel permits. *See* permit regime
travel restrictions. *See* freedom of movement
Trump, Donald, 37-38
Trump peace plan, 37
tunnels, smuggling, 132, 137, 163
Tutu, Desmond, 24-25
two-state solution, 7, 8, 235-37, 242n4
  obstacles to, 8
  Palestinian objections to, 8, 237

United Nations (UN), 4, 42, 52, 116
  2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 116
  American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and, 4, 40, 42, 43
  See also UNRWA
Unity Intifada, 2-3
UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), 38, 40, 43, 170
  building houses, 91, 95
  schools, 49, 96, 158
utilities, 233. *See also* electricity; water supply

vicious cycles, 33, 43, 72, 239
virtual reality (VR), 144

war criminals, Israeli
  using technology to bring them to justice and restore rights, 141-43
  See also soldiers

water crisis, 121
water salinity, 74, 77
water supply, 74
  agriculture and, 76, 78
water tanks, 120, 121
Watson, Emma, 25
West Bank, 64, 136, 163, 208
  books in, 159-60, 163-65
  dismantling of settlements in, 235
  environment, natural reserves, and confiscation, 64, 68
  Israeli occupation of, 165, 205, 212
  Israeli settlement expansion in, 9
  rift between Gaza and, 178
  shipping between Gaza and, 159-60
  travel between Gaza and, 94, 205, 208-10, 212-14, 218, 236
  See also permit regime
wheelchairs, 126
will to survive, a persistent, 124-25
withdrawal from Gaza. *See* Gaza Strip: Israeli “disengagement” from
World Bank, 115-18
World War II evacuation and expulsion. *See* European refugee crisis

Zionist expansion. *See* expansion

About AFSC

Founded in 1917, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that includes people of all faiths and backgrounds who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the Quaker belief in the divine light within each person, and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice. Since 1948, AFSC has worked in the United States, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territory with Palestinians, Israelis, and other committed activists to support nonviolence, challenge oppression, and end Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territory.

AFSC's history in Gaza traces back to April 1948, when staffers traveled to the Middle East to explore the possibility of helping to facilitate reconciliation between Arabs and Jews. Their insights helped AFSC agree to the urgent request from the United Nations to support displaced Palestinians in Gaza.

AFSC tackled urgent needs for food, shelter, and sanitation in ten camps and opened schools for all the children living in the Gaza Strip. The structures set up by AFSC formed the basis of the operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

AFSC's early relief work was linked to direct diplomacy that AFSC waged continually—openly in the US press, and quietly all over the region. Our voice was one of the first and most forceful speaking out regarding the need for Palestinians to return to their homes and warning that intractable problems lay ahead if hundreds of thousands of people were abandoned, with no recourse to either return or voluntary resettlement with compensation.

While AFSC ended its refugee relief work in 1950, it remained engaged in Gaza and what became Israel and the West Bank. In Gaza this work included setting up preschool activities centers in coordination with UNRWA. Many of these centers continue today as independent kindergartens.

In the 1970s AFSC started the first legal aid clinic for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, which now also functions independently. In the 1990s, AFSC began working with Palestinian young adults across the occupied Palestinian territory, and that work continues today from AFSC's offices in Jerusalem and Gaza.

This work is complemented by US-based advocacy work that focuses on realizing freedom, equality, and justice for all Palestinians and Israelis. AFSC has a long-standing US-based program focused on education and advocacy in the United States, with decades of experience organizing speaking tours, conferences, campaigns, and congressional advocacy on the issues of Palestine and Israel. AFSC domestic programs also include work on other justice issues in the United States, including challenging US immigration policies, mass incarceration, racism and prejudice, and US militarism at home and abroad.

AFSC supports the creation of this anthology to open new conversations about Gaza and its future. While the writings included here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Friends Service Committee, they represent authentic voices of Palestinians from Gaza who call on the world to act as if their lives matter.

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